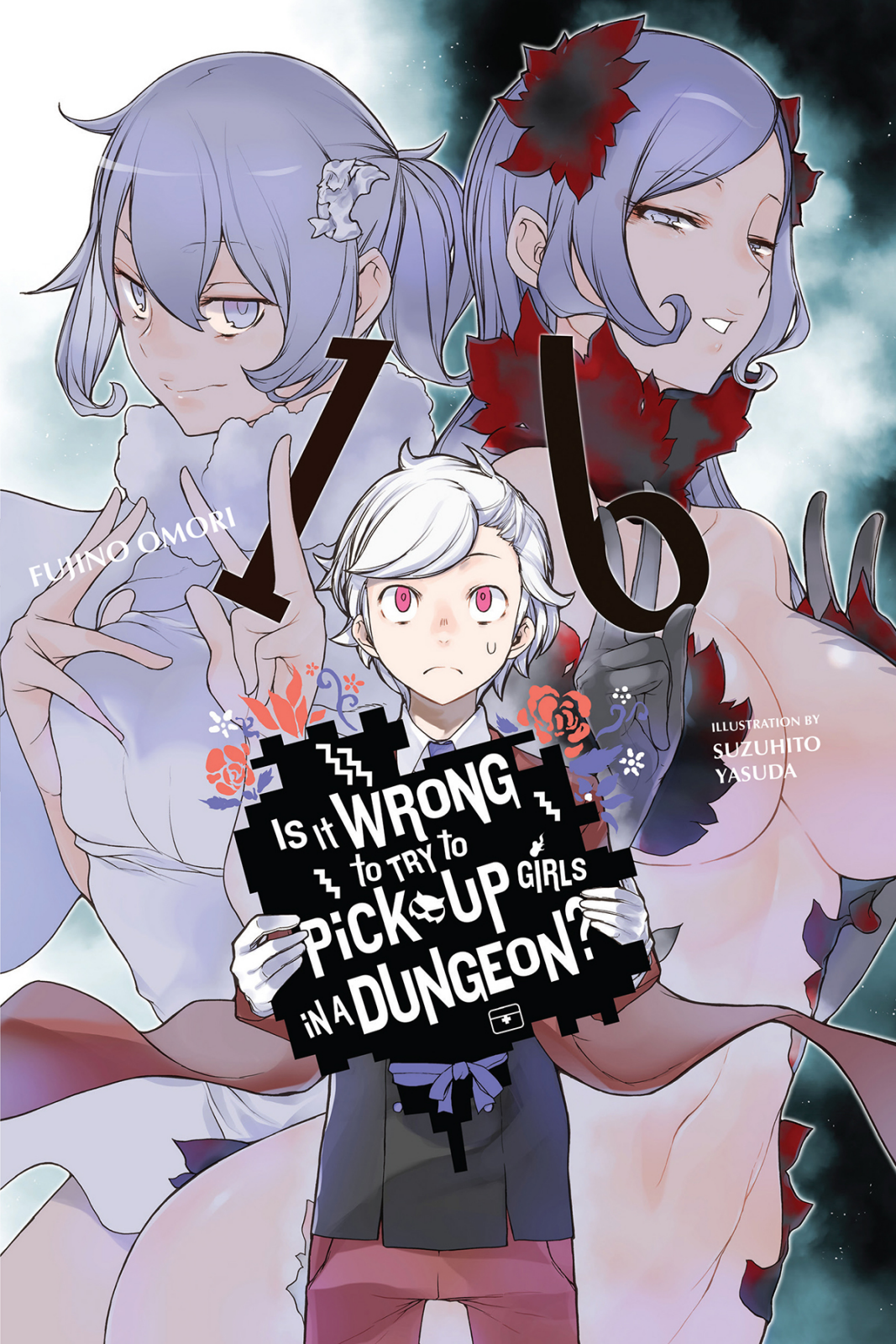


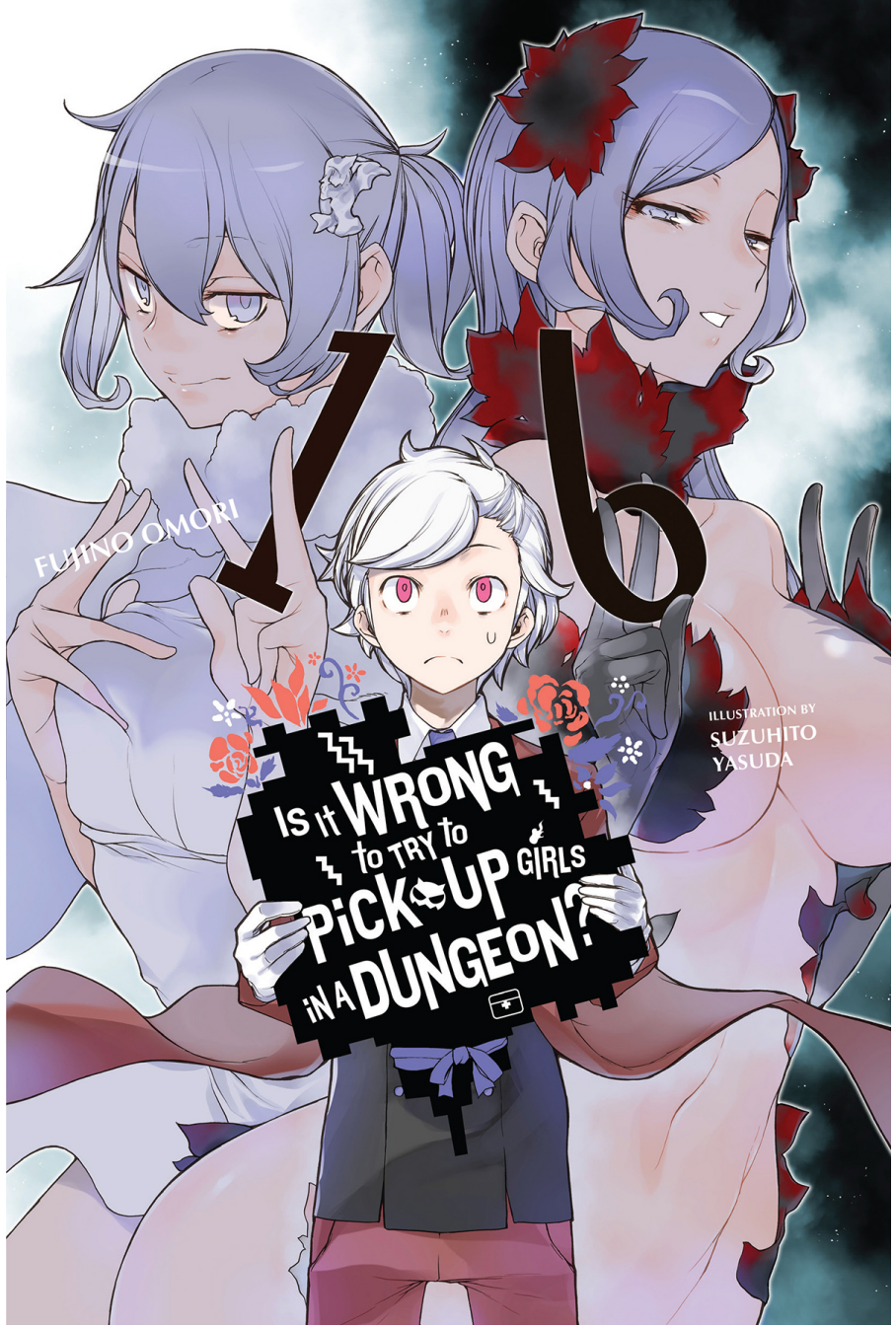


FUJINO OMORI

Is it **WRONG**
to TRY to
PICK UP GIRLS
in a **DUNGEON?**

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YASUDA





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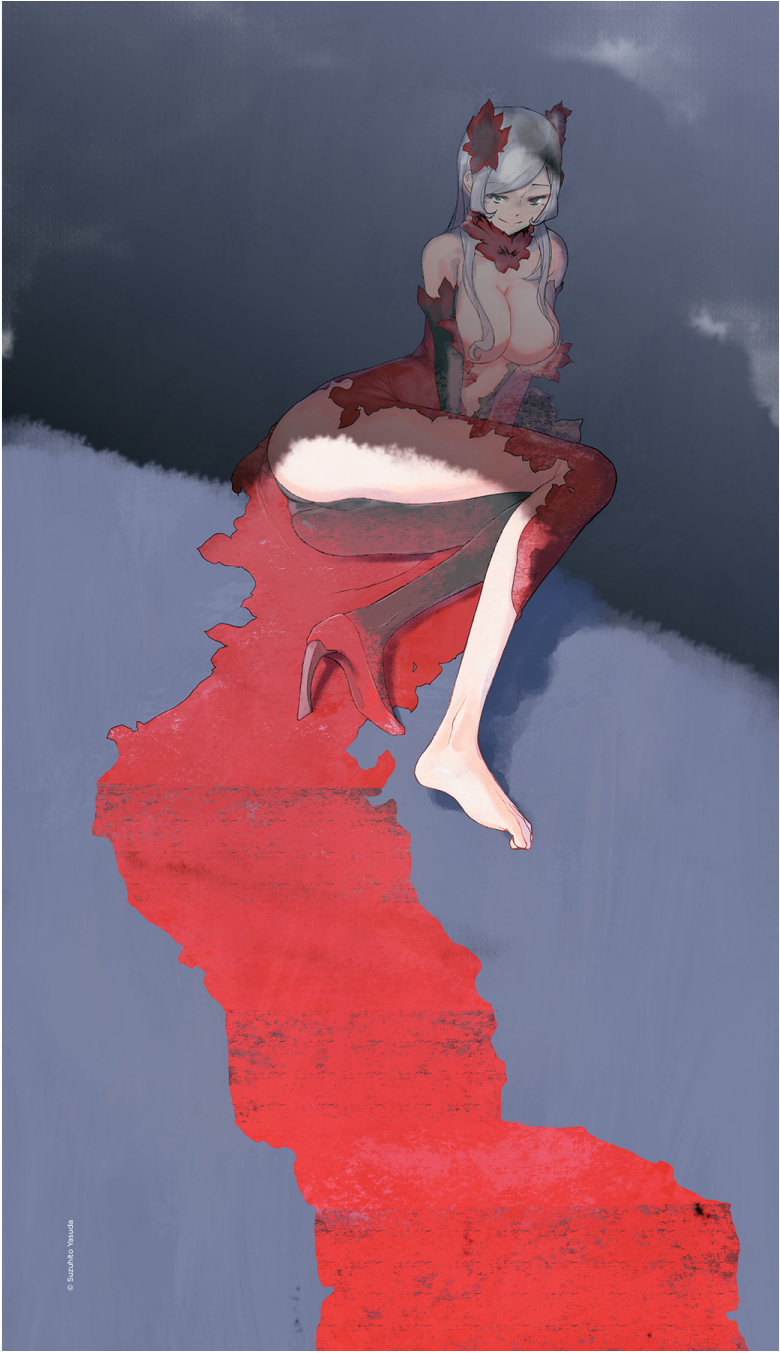
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PROLOGUE	THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN ORDINARY FRIENDSHIP AND YEARNING
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VOLUME 16

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA


NEW YORK

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?, Volume 16
FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Dale DeLucia
Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA vol. 16

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Is It Wrong to Fake Accidents to Pick Up Girls in the Dungeon?

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BELL CRANELL

The hero of the story, who came to Orario (dreaming of meeting a beautiful heroine in the Dungeon) on the advice of his grandfather. He belongs to Hestia Familia and is still getting used to his job as an adventurer.



HESTIA

A being from the heavens, she is far beyond all the inhabitants of the mortal plane. The head of Bell's Hestia Familia, she is absolutely head over heels in love with him!

LYU LEON

Formerly a powerful elven adventurer, she now works as a waitress at The Benevolent Mistress.



SYR FLOVER

A waitress at The Benevolent Mistress. She established a friendly relationship with Bell after an unexpected meeting.



FREYA

The patron goddess of Freya Familia. Hailed as the most beautiful being even among deities, a true goddess of beauty.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA

A gifted maker of magic items. Belongs to Hermes Familia.



OTTA

The captain of Freya Familia. The strongest adventurer in Orario. A hero.

WELF CROZZO

A smith who fights alongside Bell as a member of his party, he forged Bell's light armor (Punkichi series). Belongs to Hestia Familia.

HARUHIME SANJOUNO

A fox-person (yensu) from the Far East who met Bell in Orario's Pleasure Quarter. Belongs to Hestia Familia.

HERMES

The patron god of Hermes Familia. A charming god who is quick on his feet and is careful to maintain neutrality among the various factions. He is keeping tabs on Bell for someone...?

DAPHNE LAULOS

Former member of Apollo Familia, along with Cassandra. Joined Misch Familia after Apollo Familia lost the War Game.

CHLOE LOLO

A catgirl waitress at The Benevolent Mistress who talks and acts like a goddess. Chases after Bell.

MIA GRAND

The owner of a tavern called The Benevolent Mistress. Relatively tall, despite being a dwarf. Strong enough to send adventurers running away in tears.

ALFRIK GULLIVER

An adventurer who managed to reach Level 5 despite being a puny. Has three younger brothers named Duilin, Berling, and Greer.

HEDIN SELRAND

An intelligent magic swordmaster who has put his faith in Freya. His alias is Hilsdale.

LILLILUKA ERDE

A girl belonging to a race of pygmy humans known as prums, she plays the role of supporter in Bell's party. A member of Hestia Familia, she's much more powerful than she looks.

MIKOTO YAMATO

A girl from the Far East. She feels indebted to Bell after receiving his forgiveness. Belongs to Hestia Familia.

EINA TULLE

A Dungeon adviser and a receptionist for the Guild, the organization in charge of regulating the Dungeon. She has bought armor for Bell in the past, and she looks after him both officially and personally.

CASSANDRA ILLION

Like Daphne, she joined Misch Familia after Apollo Familia's defeat. She is quite attached to Daphne, who is caring toward her.

AHNYA FROMEL

One of Lyu's and Syr's coworkers at The Benevolent Mistress, she's something of a foolish catgirl.

RUNOA FAUST

A human waitress at The Benevolent Mistress. Although she seems to be a commonsense type, she has a troubled side.

ALLEN FROMEL

A cat person who belongs to Freya Familia. A Level 6 first-tier adventurer known as the fastest in Orario.

HEGNI RAGNAR

A dark elf and Hestia's old foe. His alias is Dimsdale.



CHARACTER & STORY

The Labyrinth City Orario—A large metropolis that sits over an expansive network of underground tunnels and caverns known as the "Dungeon." Bell Cranell came here to pursue his dream of becoming an adventurer. After meeting the goddess Hestia, he joined her familia and began to spend his days in the Dungeon, hoping to win the respect of his idol, the Sword Princess Aiz Wallenstein. Not long after, the supporter Lilly, the smith Welf, the Far Easterner Mikoto, and the renart Haruhime joined Hestia Familia alongside him.

As everyone reflected on their past during Ekigia, Bell happened to run into Aiz while she was laying flowers at the grave of the hero Valdstein, the Mercenary King. The autumn harvest draws near as Bell makes a shocking connection between one of the current strongest and the strongest of the distant past...





PROLOGUE

THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN ORDINARY FRIENDSHIP AND YEARNING

“Hey, Lyu.”

Lyu turned around.

They were walking back like always. She was carrying a bag of groceries, walking the familiar, empty street that led home together with the girl with bluish-gray hair.

Syr smiled when Lyu turned to look at her.

“You’ve fallen for Bell, haven’t you?”

Thud.

The grocery bag she was holding dropped to the stone pavement. Fruits spilled out onto the street, and she frantically knelt down and scrambled to gather them up like a stereotypical clumsy maid.

Her heartbeat thundered in her long ears as she picked up the scattered fruits.

It wasn’t just her ears, either. Her face, her neck—her whole body was trembling, and she felt like she was on fire.

What? What did she say? What is she asking? Where did that come from all of a sudden? Why is she asking me that?

“Wh-wh-wh...? What are you...?!”

Her voice had risen to an embarrassingly high pitch, but her young companion paid no heed to that as she helped gather the scattered fruits. She picked up a red one and handed it to Lyu, who was still struggling to respond.

“I—I know you have feelings for him, so there’s no way I would do something so boorish as—”

“Lyu,” Syr said, interrupting with a smile.

“I like Bell.”

Lyu could not understand why, but for some reason that sentence had shocked her to her core.

Was it because Syr had never once explicitly laid out her feelings? Because it seemed like she could see everything Lyu kept hidden deep within herself? Or perhaps it was how absurd she must have appeared to those all-knowing eyes—eyes that could discern black from white, truth from lie.

“Would you mind if I ask Bell out for the Goddess Festival?”

No!

She felt her heart clench.

She should have laughed that feeling off as foolishness. Obviously, she should just say *of course* and support Syr. There should have been no other choice. And yet, Lyu’s heart was still racing.

“Why...are you asking me that?” Lyu barely managed to squeeze out.

“Because I was worried I might end up doing something terrible to you, Lyu.” Syr chose her words carefully. “Whether it goes well or not, I might end up ruining everything. We might get in a fight and not be able to make up. Anyway, that’s why I wanted to ask.”

Running out of things to say, Syr smiled as she looked toward the ground.

Lyu realized that she was being absolutely sincere.

“I—I...”

Lyu could not bring herself to face such honesty head-on.

Still young by the standards of the long-lived elves, Lyu was little more than a young girl herself and had no idea how she should respond. There was no answer at the ready in her heart. So she dropped her sky-blue eyes and remembered what was most important: her bond with the girl standing before her. And the promise she had made five years ago.

“You...saved me. I want to repay you for that. I’ve told you that before. So...” She took a deep breath, as if struggling to get the words out. “...you may fall in love with whomever you wish. I will support you no matter what.”

Her answer seemed to linger. Even though they were in the middle of the street, everything was quiet. Only a narrow strip of blue sky outlined by the surrounding buildings peered down at the two of them. And Lyu still could not bring herself to meet the gaze of those blue-gray eyes.

Finally, the young girl laughed quietly.

“Thank you.”





PROLOGUE II

THE GIRL'S WISH

I liked the smile on his face when he picked up his lunch.

And whenever he talked to other women, the way he got flustered and turned red when they teased him bothered me a little.

And when a shadow fell over his bright determination, when he was struggling and hurt but even then did his best to hold his head high and push onward, I really did want to help him. Genuinely. Without any ulterior motive.

And on, and on, and on...

With every new side of him that I gleaned from so many laughably inconsequential moments we spent together, I ended up falling for him.

I never wanted to admit it. Even now, the thought alone is incredibly embarrassing. But I feel drawn to him.

I eventually reached a point where I just threw up my hands in surrender, accepting my loss after tipping my hand to reveal it was all a bluff. I stuck my tongue out and said of course I knew all along, not that anyone was listening. And once I did all that, the smile that came over me was so serene, even I had no words.

Yes. I adore him. Everything became easier after I admitted it. My body felt lighter, as if a tranquil breeze buoyed me. It was like I had found some kind of treasure. But at the same time, it was undeniable that something else clawed inside my chest.

If I had to guess the main source of the unease I felt in my heart, it would probably be the almost unnoticeable change in the one I considered precious.

—*Lyu, your face is red.*

—*Y-you must be seeing things.*

—*Are you looking at Bell?*

—*N-no! Of course not!*

She's beautiful, noble, and always dignified, but I also know that

she tends to lose her head whenever something troubles her, so it was obvious. I had thought for a while that this moment might come eventually, so that wasn't what surprised me.

Yes. There should have been no reason to feel a sense of danger. At the same time, I realized that things couldn't remain the same, either.

His coming to the restaurant and picking up his lunch, the ensuing banter with the girls here who tease him—those everyday moments could disappear without warning.

For once, I was shaken to my core. Behind my unchanging smile and serene expression, I was frozen in place.

"What is it, Syr? You've been feeling kind of off lately," Runoa said.

"...Is that how it seems?"

"Recently, your smile's been a little different."

I patted my cheeks, checking to see if something had changed, but I didn't notice anything. Runoa started to grin.

"Nya-ha-ha! A maiden's worries, mewhaps?"

"You can talk to us, Syr! If that helps, then trade with me-ow on cleaning duty!"

Chloe clung onto my back while Ahnya poked me from the front.

It was the sort of daily life that could not get any better. Something irreplaceable. And the scene unfolding now would someday disappear. The mortal realm was merciless. Time passed in the blink of an eye. I knew that well.

But the *someday* that I had feared might have come much sooner than I had expected. The moment I realized that, I could not keep myself together. My chest ached. It was far too late now, but I had learned something I never should have acknowledged. But even so, there was no stopping it anymore.

When did the means of reaching my goal become my actual goal?

When did the thornlike lie buried deep in my heart begin to hurt me?

What do I truly wish for?

I know who his eyes follow and who he chases after.

I'm perfectly aware exactly what those red eyes are looking up at.

I already understand who it is that he yearns for.

But my feelings have already been unleashed.

I want to know. I want to know. I want to know.

Are these feelings real?

Is *this* me?

Can I become *this*?

Can I break free from the divine yoke?

This isn't *love*. That's what I want to prove.



Yes.

That's exactly why.

I had no choice but to harden my resolve.

I had no choice but to give in to these impulses to prove I wasn't wrong.

Even if it was a resolve that went against her divine will, I had no choice but to try.

I climbed the long staircase. Opened the imposing door. Proceeded into the chamber beyond.

I was granted an audience with the solitary queen sitting on her throne—with the goddess sitting there with a smile. And foolish as it might be, as despicable as it might be, I faced the being who could not be defied.

I approached the goddess with a proposition.



A STORMY LOVE LETTER

CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 1

A STORMY LOVE LETTER

I smell paper.

The scent of books, like the ones I remember falling deep into as a child.

“It should be around here...”

I’m standing in front of a neatly organized bookshelf in the library of our home, Hearthstone Manor.

This room facing the courtyard is filled with row after row of books that used to belong to *Apollo Familia*. The library and its contents came with the home we took as our spoils after winning the War Game.

The immense collection had been amassed by Apollo and his followers, so I had been a bit hesitant to read them at first. But Daphne told me, “Feel free to read whatever you want. You won them fair and square. Besides, no one bothered to take any on their way out, so they’re all yours now.” Our goddess even said the books wouldn’t want to be left alone, covered in dust, so now I come here to read whenever I have a moment.

Haruhime and I use the library often. And our goddess does, too, though it’s mostly because she loves all the different forms of entertainment the mortal realm has to offer rather than the books themselves. I’ve also been adding to the collection by buying anything that catches my interest from time to time with my small allowance, so the shelves are getting pretty packed. We are going to need to think about getting a new shelf soon.

At the moment, I’m looking for a certain book amid that maze of shelves.

“There it is.”

I spot it on the upper shelf of the bookcase where the stories about heroes are kept. I stretch to reach the thick tome.

“*Dungeon Oratoria...*”

The chronicle of Orario. A compilation of the city’s legends and the journeys of a great many heroes. I crack open the book I consider the bible of my youth. I flip through the pages until I reach the final chapter.

“The hero Albert...”

A legendary hero who was known for his unparalleled strength. Many considered him to be one of the greatest figures to ever stand in the mortal realm, a man who was recorded not only in the *Dungeon Oratoria* but in countless other fairy tales and stories as well. As I stare at the illustration of a spirit and him challenging a titanic monster with a single sword in hand, the events from the other day come to mind.

—Are you visiting someone’s grave, too?

The morning after Elegia’s tribute to the fallen heroes and adventurers, I ran into Aiz at the Adventurers Graveyard. She was leaving flowers at the jet-black monument erected for the ancient heroes, in front of the gravestone in the middle of the monument that had been placed for the hero Albert.

“Wallenstein...Valdstejn.”

Albert the Great is known by many names and one of them is Valdstejn, the Mercenary King.

In ancient times, *mercenary* was a common label for someone who explored the labyrinth. In other words, the king of mercenaries was, in essence, the king of adventurers. And the Sword Princess had laid flowers at the Mercenary King’s grave...

I can’t help but suspect there’s something more than simple coincidence linking the strongest of ancient times and the current generation’s strongest.

“Valdstejn’s name...apparently isn’t in this *Dungeon Oratoria*.”

I flip through the pages but can’t find any mention of the king of mercenaries.

This is a copy of the *Dungeon Oratoria*. The original was written over a thousand years ago and has been transcribed countless times since then, but this is definitely an official printing.

The only reason I know the name Valdstejn is thanks to the copy that I read in my hometown back when I was a kid...the copy my grandfather wrote down for me.

Most would probably consider that a questionable source, and it might be right to just laugh off the name Valdstejn as a figment of my grandfather’s imagination.

But...

...I really don’t think that was just something Gramps made up.

What are the chances he invented a tale to amuse me that also just so happens to line up perfectly with Orario’s actual history? Is that truly coincidence?

I don’t really have anything to go on other than gut instinct, though.

Is Aiz the descendant of a hero...?

It isn't that shocking an idea for anyone who knows her. If anything, it makes a lot of sense. Not too much of a leap that the girl known as Orario's strongest warrior might be connected to the great heroes of old.

But something feels off. I can't really nail down why.

The expression I saw on her face that morning as she placed the flowers in front of Albert's grave didn't seem very much like someone visiting the grave of a distant ancestor.

What is this confusion in my heart? What answer am I really looking for here?

And also Albert's final...

The path he took in the legends, the great deed the Mercenary King had accomplished was—

“—? Is someone out front?”

The sound of the doorbell interrupts my thoughts.

It's coming from the entrance. We have a guest.

I peer out the library window just in time to hear an “Eep!” and see Haruhime's tail fluttering in a panic. It looks like she has her hands full hanging the laundry, so I close my book and leave the library. I run through the hallway facing the courtyard and say, “I'll get it!” as I wave at Haruhime, who bows politely.

Lilly and the others are also home, but I reach the door first.

“Just a moment,” I call out as the bell rings again.

I open the door.

“——”

My eyes shoot open, and for a second, I don't know what to say.

On the other side of the door is a beautiful girl who I don't recognize.

The long hair covering the right side of her face looks ashen, as if all color has drained away from it. Her left eye is pure black, like it had been filled with darkness. But neither detract from her beauty. Her dress is a black that perfectly matches her eye and reveals almost no skin. The outfit practically makes her seem like a witch's apprentice.

She's human and definitely older than me, though we're around the same height. And hidden behind her hair is an expressionless, almost doll-like face.

But...what is this feeling?

Her gaze is ice cold. Actually, I might even call it hostile...

“Bell Cranell.”

“Y-yes?...Um, do you know me?” I ask, surprised to be called by name by someone I've never met before.

“It's rather impossible for anyone who spends time in Orario to avoid hearing the name of the record holder, no matter how much one

might want to. Have the decency to recognize just how widespread your ear-grating fame has become. And that oafish face of yours is infuriating as well,” she coolly fires back.

“Ack?!”

My cluelessness is clearly showing because she made sure to point it out specifically.

We literally just met, but she’s already giving me a mouthful and looking at me like I’m the grimmest rabbit!

I’ve never met a woman like her before...!

While I’m still reeling, she looks away and mutters softly:

“...If only you had never shown up.”

Huh?

I go wide-eyed, but then she faces me again as if nothing had happened.

“Here.”

“A—a letter?”

“From a person of import, addressed to you. Make sure to read it, please.”

After delivering the message, she immediately turns on her heels, her long dress twirling to follow. I feel a chill as I watch her go. Her very being seems to exude a certainty that if our encounter had gone on for much longer, she might have done something *drastic*. Luckily, she leaves me with only a few quiet words and the letter.

I stand there in shock until after she passes the main gate and disappears.

“What was that about?” a voice behind me asks.

“Hwah?!”

Turning around frantically, I see Welf standing there as if it were only natural.

“That isn’t a love letter, right?! I don’t want to deal with any more of that stupid stuff!”

“A—a love letter?! Hand delivered in broad daylight on the very steps of our home?! For Master Bell?! Aaaaah...!”

“Calm yourself, Lady Haruhime! We don’t know for sure whether it’s a love letter yet!”

Wait—Lilly and Haruhime and even Mikoto?! When did they all get here?!

And quit saying *love letter* so much!

“How long have you guys been there?!”

“From around the time she said, ‘Get lost, you revolting, uncultured goblin!’” Lilly says, eyes flaring.

“It wasn’t that harsh!” I wince at her oddly critical response.

“Jokes aside, she seemed a bit more threatening than your average visitor, so we came to see what was up,” Welf chimes in.

“You were completely overwhelmed by her presence, so it’s understandable you didn’t notice,” Mikoto adds.

“There was quite a lot sweat pouring down the back of your neck...” Haruhime says.

I guess they were hiding in the hallway and listening in.

Haruhime naturally produces a handkerchief and graciously wipes my still-damp neck. When I start to blush, Lilly rams Haruhime in the hip. As she goes flying in her maid pinafore, Lilly jabs me with her little finger.

“More importantly, what is your relationship with that woman?! What did you do to draw her attention?!”

“What does that even mean?! I have no idea what’s going on! I’ve never even met her before!”

I’m totally at a loss, but I’m telling the truth. Hearing that, Lilly pauses as a serious expression crosses her face.

“She’s a member of *Freya Familia*.”

“Huh...*F-Freya Familia*?!”

I hadn’t expected that name to come up.

She’s part of the faction on par with Aiz’s *Loki Familia*?!

“The goddess’s attendant, Hörn. One allowed to be at Freya’s side without merely being a servant, the head chamberlain. She normally stays in either Babel or their home in order to wait on Freya hand and foot, and apparently like her patron goddess, she rarely ventures outside...” Lilly explains.

“A-are you sure it was her?”

“The emblem on her clothes seemed right and she fit the descriptions I’ve heard, too, so yeah, that was probably her,” Welf says.

Ashen hair and clad in black, she matched the rumors about the goddess’s attendant.

After blinking several times, I realize something...

“Um, you said her name was Hörn? What’s her last name...?”

“She doesn’t have one. At least that’s what the rumors say. And she doesn’t have an alias, either.”

“Eh?”

“Freya apparently refused to name her at Denatus, saying, ‘This child will never become anyone.’”

For a moment, a pointless thought crosses my mind. Being able to refuse to name a follower at Denatus? I guess that’s a privilege exclusive to one of the most powerful families.

But still, forgoing an alias completely? That’s an unthinkable choice under normal circumstances. There are apparently times when deities would say, “Nooo, it’s too early for them, don’t give them a name that’ll only dredge up dark pasts,” and hold off for vague

reasons, but these titles are fairly simple and straightforward when it comes to upper-class adventurers.

I mean, the titles granted to adventurers by the gods are supposed to be praise for their greatest feats. As far as a familia is concerned, they are easy-to-understand advertisements of their most glorious achievements. They are displays of the power of your own familia and can serve as a check on rivals, too. To refuse a second name...

Freya Familia is considered by many to be the strongest group in the city. I guess you could argue that there's no reason to be fussing over minor details once you've climbed to the top, but...

"Since she doesn't have an alias, she's become known by the nickname Nameless."

"N-Nameless?"

"Yes. She's become famous to some extent for not having a title. A unique upper-class adventurer."

That explains how she could be so well-known without ever showing herself.

A high-level adventurer of *Freya Familia* who has no title.

Why did she come here to personally deliver something to me...?

"For now, shall we look at that letter? We likely won't be figuring out anything by simply speculating about it," Mikoto suggests.

"Ah! That's right! Please show us the contents of the letter!" Lilly adds, latching onto the idea.

"Um, okay."

The envelope isn't particularly extravagant, and there is no familia emblem visible anywhere on it. If anything, the neat and cute packaging gives off the impression that a girl wrote the letter, which makes me open it all the more carefully, a nervous look plastered on my face.

"It might be an invitation to a Banquet of the Gods like with Apollo..."

"And then another War Game? That isn't funny."

"Being attacked by the faction that defeated Ishtar, is that our fate...?!"

"Crouch down, Master Bell! Let Lilly see, too!"

No one can hide their anxiety at getting a letter from *Freya Familia*.

Leaning over so Lilly can see, I read through the folded stationary while they look over my shoulders.

Flowery script spills across the paper:

Dear Bell,

Would you please join me on a date for just the two of us during the Goddess Festival?

Syr

...?

...Huh? Syr?

...What?

The string of letters blows away all the tension and bad premonitions, freezing my thoughts in place.

And Lilly and the others, who had been frozen just like me, start to tremble.

“““““I-it’s a love letter!”””””

“E-ehhhhhhhhh?!”



“Wait, Bell got a love letter?!”

Later that night, our goddess’s shout shakes the rafters after she came home from her part-time job and heard the news during family dinner.

“From whom?! Who was it?! That adviser from the Guild?! Or Cassandra from Miach’s place?! Or was it Aisha, that Amazon aiming to steal my Bell’s chastity?! Or could it have been that Wallenwhatsherface?!”

“It was Ms. Syr, from The Benevolent Mistress!”

“From the tavern, huh?!”

Our goddess is bent over the table, sweating as she cradles her head in her hands. It’s dinnertime, but with everything happening, I can’t really work up an appetite...

“Sending a love letter to my Bell...! Attacking head-on after we had struck a nonaggression pact following the initial shows of force! She’s my enemy, but I have to respect her guts! Well played!”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Goddess...”

“Incidentally, I had originally intended for that knife of yours to be called the Dagger of Love,” our goddess says smugly.

“What?!”

“Nobody asked for such useless trivia!” Lilly pounds the table.

Our goddess coughs, calming down as she turns a sharp gaze on Lilly.

“Hey, Supporter! You were here, weren’t you? How could you let such a brazen attack happen on your watch? You’re supposed to keep an eye on Bell, aren’t you?!”

“My apologies, Lady Hestia...! Lilly never imagined there would be someone who would walk up to our home in broad daylight and hurl a love letter through the door...! Upper-class adventurers are truly a group of unpredictable monsters! My greatest failure!”

Lilly seems to be blaming herself.

Still, keeping an eye on me...? I've thought this for a while now, but they really are too overprotective of me.

I guess they don't trust me because of what I said about harems before. Or is it more of a "you have to consider your position as commander now, so keep it together" kind of thing?

Either way...

I look around to see if I can get anyone to side with me, but everyone else just turns away.

Hellooo...?

"M-more importantly, why did someone from *Freya Familia* deliver a letter from Syr? That's what bothering me..." I admit that was a bit painful, but it's about time we tackled the main issue.

Not that we can just ignore the stuff about a date, but honestly, the *Freya Familia* connection is what's bothering me most.

"I haven't had many chances to interact with Lady Syr, but is it possible she is a member of *Freya Familia*...?" Haruhime asks.

"There's no way. You can tell from her demeanor and how she carries herself that she hasn't been given Falna. She's just a normal person unconnected to any familia," Welf responds.

"Is it possible she's a noncombatant member? Maybe not quite like Lady Haruhime and the Pleasure Quarter prostitutes, but perhaps she's a devout follower?" Mikoto chimes in.

"Hmm, I can't really picture Syr doing something like that..." I add.

Besides, if that were the case, would someone in the position to be called Freya's head chamberlain go out of her way to personally deliver the letter of a low-ranking noncombatant?

"I mean, I don't think there's much point in trying to guess. This is Syr we're talking about, after all."

"I-isn't that a little careless, Lilly...?"

"Think about it. She's the same girl who sees through everything and always has that sparkling smile. Can't you picture her getting along fine with anyone who walks into that tavern, adventurer or deity?"

There's a certain sulkiness in Lilly's gaze, but I can't really help but agree, irrational as it sounds.

Hörn might hardly ever show her face in public, but if I imagine her standing next to Syr...I could almost see her visiting the tavern and having a friendly chat...

Everyone pauses and sinks into thought with a chorus of *hmm*s.

...But wait, if I remember correctly...

A memory from more than two months ago crosses my mind.

The orphanage on Daedalus Street that I found after following Syr.

When I fought that barbarian in the secret underground passage at the children's request. It was Vana Freya who had intervened—one of *Freya Familia*'s first-tier adventurers.

Thinking back on it now, he always seemed to be guarding Syr—
“Anyway! I've never met this Syr girl! Not even once!”

Our goddess's voice pulls me back from the deep sea of memories. Looking up, I see her crossing her arms and pouting.

“Oh, really?” Lilly asks questioningly.

“Yes, really! I couldn't go to the last party because of my job! For whatever reason, I never have any luck when that tavern's involved!” our goddess proclaims with a strange sense of pride.

This feels like *déjà vu*. Have we had a conversation like this before? Back when the whole city hated me because of the Xenos situation, I recall the two of us visiting The Benevolent Mistress and her mentioning how it was the first time she had ever been there.

“Syr's that girl who gives my Bell handmade lunches, right? I've been thinking about paying her a visit for a while now, so I staked out the tavern in secret before going to work!”

“When in the world...?”

“But I couldn't find her! She wouldn't show herself at all! I'm sure this Syrwhosit was hiding in terror from me!”

“There's no reason for Ms. Syr to be afraid of you, Lady Hestia. And please stop trying to stick extra things onto the ends of people's names.”

It's pretty hard to tell whether our goddess is feeling angry or proud, but Lilly is simply exasperated. I just plaster on an awkward smile along with everyone else.

Thinking back on it, Syr might actually be the only one from the tavern our goddess hasn't met. She met Lyu when she helped us out on the eighteenth floor, and she met with Ahnya and the others when she went to them for the rescue request during the last expedition. I guess we can chalk it up to bad timing?

While thinking about Syr a bit more, I mention the other thing that caught my attention.

“Also, what exactly is the Goddess Festival...?” I ask tentatively.

“Ah, right. If you didn't even know about the Elegia, then I guess it makes sense you wouldn't know this, either,” Welf says. “The Goddess Festival and Elegia are considered the two most major festivals.”

“What does that mean?”

“Basically, Elegia leaves the city in a sad and somber mood, so in order to brighten things up, the two are held close together,” Lilly elaborates.

“The Goddess Festival is a harvest festival, a banquet of plenty.”

“So then why the name Goddess Festival...?”

“It refers to the deities who preside over bountiful harvests. The festival is centered around those goddesses.”

It’s currently fall in Orario. Six months have passed since I first came here, and in that time, the green sprouts of spring had come and gone, the summer sunlight had passed, and now harvest time is here. Apparently, the Goddess Festival begins when the deities of the harvest declare the opening of festivities and the city partakes in the full bounty of the season. Harvest celebrations like that were a fun thing in the village I grew up in, too.

“I’ve only heard about it from my brothel sisters and various customers, as I haven’t experienced it myself, but it’s said to get quite lively. And there are lots of sweet fruits all around.” Haruhime smiles slightly.

“That’s right. It’s a wonderful celebration. A scant two years have passed since I first came to Orario with Lord Takemikazuchi, but it was quite a spectacle and had the same feel as a mainland festival.”

Mikoto, who helped make dinner with me tonight since it was our turn, sips at her miso soup while reminiscing about past festivals.

Thinking of shared history and mourning the fallen, followed by a cheerful festival celebrating the bountiful harvest and a belief in the future—apparently, that’s what the two major holidays are all about.

Well, that explains some things.

“Holy Night Festival, Monsterphilia, Grand Day, and the month of the gods...there are other significant dates, but those plus the two major festivals are Orario’s most famous celebrations,” Lilly says as she counts off the events on her little fingers.

After learning more about it, I’m actually starting to look forward to the Goddess Festival, which is only six days away. Hardly any time between it and Elegia. I’m excited about what we might get to see.

And in order to be able to focus on that, I’m going to have to deal with this letter somehow, but...

“...So what are you going to do, Bell? I mean about that invitation...” our goddess asks nervously.

I go silent for a moment, and while it’s a bit rude to do at the dinner table, I take out the letter. It’s a very short invitation, almost jarringly anticlimactic. I’ve also never really seen Syr’s handwriting, so it feels surreal. Is she the type of person who would say, “I wrote ‘date’ in the letter, but the truth is I just have to go shopping for the tavern”? Like just helping her with groceries or something?

She’s always been kind, if a little mischievous. Is it possible she wrote it that way to tease me again...?

...No, that doesn’t seem likely.

If all she wanted was to joke around, she could have just waited

until my next visit to the tavern. That's what she always does. Her feelings come through all the more clearly in the letter precisely because she used a few select words rather than a slew of elegant turns of phrase.

I still can't figure out why someone from *Freya Familia* delivered it, but I don't think this can be written off as a simple joke.

"Mm-hmmmm..."

I can feel my cheeks growing hotter. I start to groan as I turn red.

Waaaaaaaaaaaaah! Bell's turning reeeeeeeed?! Dammit! I should have said something about going to the festival soonerrrrrrrrr!!!

Hestia's gaze was focused on his face as she cried out in her heart. Her thinking had originally gone something like: *So much happened around Elegia; maybe I should wait a bit before asking him out on a date; I should just rake in the cash from holiday pay at my job...* She berated herself for procrastinating.

Mr. Bell's thinking about going?! But Lilly was planning to arrange something with him if Lady Hestia didn't get in the waaaaaaaaaaaaaay!

Stealing a glance at Bell, Lilly held her head in her hands. The strategist who had been shrewdly plotting a date with him cursed her lax judgment and her patron goddess's hindrance.

An illicit tryst during the festival, nestling together from noon until night, whispering sweet nothings to each other, before ending up in in bed together—Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Master Bell and Syr having seven children?!

Haruhime blushed bright red as she peeked at his face. The former prostitute, having been filled with forbidden knowledge by Aisha, had surreptitiously included Syr into the cast as she slipped into a pink haze of delusions.

I should learn from Syr and reach out to Takemikazuchi...!

I should ask Hephaistos...no, it's too soon to aim for the ultimate summit. This isn't the time to be thinking about love...

Mikoto and Welf looked down in deep thought and crossed their arms.

Syr had spurred them to think about the deities they loved, making them completely oblivious to the goddess and girls muttering and trembling nearby.

And Bell, still looking at the letter, failed to notice anything going on around him.

A single letter from the tavern's idol had thrown *Hestia Familia* into absolute chaos.

"...For now, I'm going to go see Syr tomorrow and talk to her."

Bell scratched his still-burning cheek as he announced his decision.



“What?! You invited adventurer boy out to the Goddess Festival?!” a stunned voice rang out from The Benevolent Mistress on West Main Street.

“Shhh. You’re too loud, Runoa. You’ll wake Mei and the others.” Syr held her finger to her lips, shushing Runoa as she got ready to take off her uniform.

Night had fallen, the tavern was closed, and the staff was in the middle of wrapping up for the day. Syr, Runoa, Ahnya, Chloe, and Lyu were all shedding their green uniforms. The other employees had already left for the other building and collapsed into a deep sleep after another hard day of work.

“Huh?! What does that mean? Hmmeow?”

“It means Syr’s going on a date with adventurer boy, you dumb cat!”

“Meeow?! You finally went after him! And during the Goddess Festival, too? You’re really going hard! Ahhhh, my little boy’s butt is in danger!”

Ahnya, Runoa, and Chloe looked positively haggard, but such juicy news could not fail to animate them. Chloe in particular was abnormally excited. She was breathing heavily as she stood there in just her slip as her slender limbs and tail wriggled around.

Syr covered her chest with the apron she had taken off. Her eyes were unamused as she batted away Chloe’s tail.

“.....”

Chloe raised a “Yip!” as she leaped into the corner of the room, holding her tail in her hand. Meanwhile, Lyu had gone still and silent after unbuttoning her top. She was not excited like her coworkers. Her sky-blue eyes were wide open as she stared at the girl with ash-colored hair.

“...S-Syr...when did you do that?” Lyu forced the question out.

“Umm, I gave the letter to someone I know...and had it delivered to his familia’s home.” Syr smiled to hide her blushing embarrassment.

Lyu found it almost impossible to string any words together. She had been told beforehand by Syr herself, so she had known it was coming, but when the reality of it finally hit home, she was still almost laughably stunned.

“Leaving it to someone else? That’s not very like you, Syr!” Ahnya quipped as she leaned in, her surprisingly ample bosom thrust out from her undone top.

“Why didn’t you go deliver it yourself?” Runoa asked, leaving the black stockings she had been in the process of taking off still hanging around her ankles.

“Umm, about that...” Syr’s hair fluttered as she struggled to voice her thoughts. She smiled a bit before answering. “If I went to see him now, he would just assume I was teasing him like always and probably smile in relief...I don’t think we could have a real date like that.”

She had just undeniably shared her true feelings. In fact, her expression as she said it out loud was sweeter and purer than any of the girls had ever seen before. Realizing from her bashful response that she was serious, Ahnya and Runoa glanced at each other. They immediately burst into grins.

“Meow-*ha*! I gotcha!”

“So you finally made up your mind, huh? Then I’ll do what I can to help!”

“Thank you, Ahnya, Runoa. In that case, I have a request already. If Bell comes to the tavern, could you tell him I’m not here? If I met him now, it’d—”

“Leave it to me! I’ll drive him away! I’ll tell him the tavern’s closed to guys right meow and throw him off your tail!”

“You’re not making any sense, you dumb cat.”

Boisterous voices rang out in support, starting with Ahnya, who proudly raised a fist to her chest in a salute as she made her declaration. Syr broke into a smile as the others patted her back.

“...”

Meanwhile, Lyu watched the scene without moving. Seeing Syr smile and blush like that had struck her to her core.

Chloe was the only one who noticed.

“...Are you okay with it ending like this?” she asked, her usual joking demeanor gone.

Lyu twitched in surprise.

“I—I...” She opened and closed her mouth several times, trying to find the words to say. After looking down, she finally managed to find her voice. “...That’s a silly question. Syr has liked Bell all along. I’ve known that and supported her. Bell is a fitting partner for Syr...and Syr is a fitting partner for Bell.”

Words kept tumbling out of her mouth, more so than normal, as she was prone to do when she struggled with some kind of inner turmoil.

Lyu could not hide the raging swirl of emotions seeping into her voice.

“‘Bell,’ huh...” Chloe murmured.

The way Lyu referred to him had changed.

Chloe’s eyes narrowed before she resumed her usual playfulness.

“Well, do your best not to regret your choice, whatever mew do,” she said with a wave of her hand before she finished changing and left the room.

Left behind, Lyu kept staring at the floor.

“...”

Syr did not miss Lyu's sorry state, but she quietly looked away, not saying anything.



Even shrouded in darkness, Orario was still the city that never slept. Recently, however, the mood had changed.

The reason was ELEGIA.

It was considered poor taste to immediately return to the usual carousing as soon as the memorial for heroes and adventurers was over. The deities surely would not mind, but to mortals, death and loss were solemn subjects that were respected.

Because of that, for a short while after ELEGIA, generally until it was time for the second of the two major festivals—the Goddess Festival—the city was less rowdy than usual. It was not as if the Guild or any other governing body had arranged for it to be that way. This was simply a natural way of being for the residents of the Labyrinth City.

The adventurers who were tipping back a drink or two at pubs and taverns went about their drinking in a peculiar silence, either in deference to the town's mood or because they valued these precious quiet moments, even as rough-and-tumble as they were. After all, they were undoubtedly the ones who had spent the most time with fellow adventurers who had embarked on a journey to the heavens.

Of course there were exceptions, but even *Ganesha Familia*, responsible for the city's law and order, was able to pass this one moment mostly in peace.

The shining stars, usually overwhelmed by a deluge of magic-stone lights, were clearly visible in the night sky, and the moon sat high above, looking down over the tranquil city.

At the same time—

“I've summoned you all for an emergency meeting.”

As if the mood of the town meant nothing to them, a certain group had gathered, scowling and speaking in hushed, heavy tones with deadly serious expressions.

The location was the city's fifth district. This was almost the exact center of the city's shopping district.

Cut off from the outside world by high walls on all sides was a field deep inside Orario. This was Folkvangr, the home of *Freyja Familia*, who was hailed as the city's strongest faction.

An enormous manor stood at the center of the field, and inside was a room with a round table where the familia's captain, Ottar, had

summoned the faction's most powerful members for an emergency meeting.

"What's this about, Ottar? It better not be something stupid like last time," a catman sitting atop the table asked as he glared at Ottar with a piercing gaze.

He was about 160 celches, but despite his relatively small frame, the force behind his words and eyes was intense enough to make the average adventurer flinch. His each and every move was overtly aggressive. He was Allen Fromel—known by many as Vana Freya. Despite being the second-in-command of the familia, he did not bother to hide the hostility in his speech and actions, even when dealing with Ottar.

"You look even graver than usual, Ottar."

"Meaning you have an actual reason for summoning us here, then?"

"Do you intend to finally settle things with *Loki Familia*?"

"Or is it another of the goddess's whims?"

The four matching voices came from four identical prums. Despite being members of the so-called weakest race, they had all reached Level 5. They were the Gulliver brothers. In order of age, Alfrik, Dvalinn, Berling, and Grer were known collectively as the Bringar, and they were widely feared by their fellow adventurers.

"Heh-heh...The Goddess Festival is nigh. The banquet of abundance shall soon be at hand. This year, we shall adorn the festival eve's celebrations with the blood of decisive battle...Cry out, heavens above and tremble, earth below, for I am milady's guardian. Kh-kh-kh-kh...!"

Across from the Gulliver brothers, a dark elf, rare even in Orario, was spinning foreboding verses like he was evoking legends and myths. His skin was ebony, and his silver hair almost had a light purple sheen to it. From his forelocks that usually covered his right eye to the eerie way his lips twisted into a grin, he was hailed by all the deities as the Sick Edge Lord.

"Don't talk, Hegni; it's just a waste of time."

A white elf, who could be considered in some ways to be the standard of elfdom, berated the dark elf. Despite being of the same race, his appearance was the polar opposite. His blond hair was as long as any woman's, while his skin was pale and smooth. A brilliant coral-red hue was set in his eyes, over which he wore glasses, exuding the impression of a consummate intellectual. He had been blessed with a beauty even deities found remarkable.

This was Hegni Ragnar and Hedin Selrand. Though neither of them intended it nor desired it, they were often mistaken for a pair, and both were overwhelmingly powerful magic swordsmen.

Looking around the room at the almost too unique first-tier adventurers of his familia, Ottar got straight to the point in a painstakingly weighty tone.

“The reason I summoned you is for nothing less than Lady Syr. She will be going on a date with Bell Cranell.”

No one bothered pointing out the absurdity of such a large, clumsy warrior speaking the word *date* so seriously. Indeed, there was a clatter as several of the people around the table leaped out of their seats. The shorter prum brothers even stood atop their chairs.

“What do you mean, Ottar?”

“Lady Syr and that rabbit?”

“None of this makes any sense.”

“Explain!”

“A report has come from Hörn. Our charge—*Lady Syr*—has invited him out. A rendezvous for just the two of them during the Goddess Festival. Moreover, it was a serious invitation and not merely a common jest.”

Ottar explained what he knew in workmanlike fashion.

Shock was visible on the four prums’ faces as he broke the news.

“Wh-what...?”

“Seriously?”

“And during the Goddess Festival?”

“Wait. What do we do about protection, then?”

“Naturally, we split into two,” Ottar responded to the four brothers again.

Hearing that, everyone there knew exactly why they had been summoned that night.

“We will decide our roles during the Goddess Festival now—who will be responsible for protecting our goddess, and who the girl.”

As understanding spread around the round table, the first to speak up was Hegni.

“Our mistress governs over abundance and fertility, so reigning at the center of this great city is only natural...and thus it is inescapable that the girl of fate must be placed upon the scales...However, I propose a stratagem by which we may be assured a resolution without any discord...kh-kh-kh-kh.”

“What are you even saying, stupid?”

“Speak a language we can understand, stupid.”

“Dumb jittery elf.”

“Hedin, translate for us. That’s your job, isn’t it?”

“I’m not this fool’s keeper,” the blond-haired white elf shot back coolly at the prums.

““““Just do it already!””””

Hedin heaved a sigh at the four simultaneous demands and looked

over at the dark elf sitting next to him.

“Cut through the eternal turmoil and dispatch the hare as a sacrifice to the gods...!”

“He said, ‘Why don’t we just assassinate Bell Cranell already?’”

““““Is that a joke?! We’ll murder you!””””

The Gulliver brothers exploded at Hedin’s translation.

“Bell Cranell is Lady Freya’s prey! Don’t assume we can just do whatever we please with him!”

“Not that we don’t understand the feeling!”

“Not that we haven’t thought before about dealing with him in secret!”

“But if he died, Lady Freya would be upset!”

A resounding wave of complaints spread from the prums, who prioritized their patron goddess above all else. And as they all yelled, the eldest brother glaring in rage delivered the decisive truth.

“And if Bell Cranell died, Lady Freya would probably go back to the heavens to follow his soul!”

“Eh?! N-no way. I don’t want that...Wh-wh-wh-wh-what do we do?!” His logic shredded, Hegni’s tone shifted dramatically and he started fidgeting awkwardly.

““““Don’t go back to normal now, you weak-minded elf!!!””””

This was *Freya Familia*, feared throughout Orario as the city’s strongest faction. Because they had sworn absolute fealty to their patron goddess, they tended to lose their cool and their composure when it came to anything involving her.

The meeting descended into comical farce as a clamor of shouts filled the room. Ottar was at a loss as the discussion continued making no progress—a rather predictable development. Hedin heaved another deep sigh.

“—What a waste of time,” Allen spat as he stood up.

Utterly fed up with both the conversation and the trouble caused by a single girl, he made to leave the room.

“Wait, Allen, we haven’t finished...”

“There’s nothing to say. I’m guarding the girl. Figure out the rest among yourselves.

“What a pain in the ass,” Allen added before opening the doors and leaving.

The Gulliver brothers scoffed in annoyance as they watched him go while Hegni kept glancing around restlessly.

This time, Ottar closed his eyes quietly, as if enduring in silence.

“...”

One person, though, the white elf, was transported to an altogether different forest of thoughts.

MONOLOGUE I



MONOLOGUE I



All alone, unbeknownst to anyone, the goddess granted me an audience that day, and I struck a deal with her.

It was a secret agreement: both a contract and a challenge.

I revealed the truth in my heart.

—*I've also come to love him.*

—*I've come to love that boy because of your heart.*

My confession elicited the sort of surprise the goddess never let show on her face.

—*“That’s unexpected.”*

—*“But that’s how it is.”*

She murmured, acknowledging my confession.

Having gained her understanding, I revealed my proposition.

I was only ever a fake to begin with. I understood full well I was merely her tool. But I asked her if it was at all possible to grant me just a small part of a single day during the harvest festival.

—*I would like to spend a day out with him and see which of us can win his heart. A fair match is what I wish for, Milady.*

—*Would you please give me a chance?*

It was shameless. Arrogant.

I was fully aware of that, but I refused to simply give up. There was no turning back. If I let this chance slip away, I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life. A bead of sweat trickled down my cheek, but my gaze never left her eyes.

The goddess fell silent at my request, slipping into deep thought atop her throne.

She did not know. She had no inkling of my plan. Of the betrayal I was plotting. But even so, even if it was a foolish dream that I didn’t deserve, I desperately wanted to fulfill this maddening wish—

Had my plea swayed her?

She said she would accept my proposal with a condition.

—*If your deception is discovered, it will count as your loss.*

—*From that point on, you will be barred from being involved with him in any way.*

—*You will never be allowed to meet him ever again.*

It was inevitable. I never had any choice but to agree.

I acknowledged my acceptance of her terms.

“Do your best.”

The goddess smiled. And then her eyes narrowed provocatively.

“And I’ll enjoy the festivities as I please, too.”

Naturally, I could only nod in response.

This would be a fair match.

Since I had been the one to propose the game, there would be no going back on my word even if I had to play by the rules of a goddess who could not be disobeyed.

The hands on the clock had already started moving. There was just a single thought in my heart.

Please let my wish come true...

CHAPTER
2

A
TEARFUL
AND
PAINFUL
FESTIVAL
EVE





CHAPTER 2

A TEARFUL AND PAINFUL FESTIVAL EVE

Another autumn morning has arrived. This is the time of year when you can feel the sun gradually coming out later and later with every sunrise.

I set off from home and head toward The Benevolent Mistress in order to ask Syr directly about the letter from yesterday.

“Still, though, where do I even start...?” I murmur to myself while walking through the mostly empty streets.

What did she mean by a date? Not just going out to play, but a real date? Is she just playing a trick on me?

It’s not like I can ask her something like that so bluntly. And for some reason, it sort of feels like I shouldn’t bring it up in the first place.

I’ll be far less anxious if this is all just a misunderstanding, and she tells me, “Huh? Silly Bell, getting such wild ideas just from reading the word ‘date.’ I’m sorry for confusing you. I didn’t think you were such a child. You really are cute.”

...On second thought, that would be extremely painful in its own way.

With still no idea what I should do, I peer down at the letter in my right hand. I can’t help focusing on the fact that she asked me out by letter of all things, and now I’m getting oddly nervous. If that was the intended effect...then I don’t think I will ever be a match for Syr.

I would never have felt like this if she had mentioned it during one of our usual chats at the tavern. It would have been like the first time we met, when she made me promise to visit. I’m sure I would’ve just smiled and accepted it while thinking how unfair she can be.

“...It’s already been six months since then, huh...?”

I pause in the middle of the street, staring up at Babel towering in the sky. My first run-in with Syr happened on a morning just like this. It had been a bit earlier in the day. I remember the spring sun barely peeking over the city walls. Since then, the air has taken on a chill, and it’s a cool, autumn sun shining down on me now.

Between then and now...how much have we changed?

“...Anyway, I should go see her. No point dwelling on it!”

Wallowing in my thoughts isn't my style. I shake my head and clench my fist.

Right, delaying things won't make anything better. Just need to be brave and push on, like an adventurer should. I like to think I've made at least a little bit of improvement since back then.

Nodding to myself, I start running through the streets, leaving my hesitation behind. I dash onto West Main Street where The Benevolent Mistress stands.

“—Mgh?!”

That's the moment *someone* catches me.

A single hand reaches out from the narrow alley, covers my mouth, and somehow drags me into the shadows.

I can't break free!

I'm shaken by the realization that even with my Level 4 status, I'm helpless against the grip of a single slender arm. No one notices my sudden disappearance as I'm pulled farther and farther into the dark alley.

Everything seems to happen several times faster than normal as the hand clasped around my face holds me up in the air—hey, that hurts! My face and neck feel like they're going to break at any moment!

I can't even scream because right now, my mouth is still being held shut. After shouting dozens of times in my head, I'm thrown to the ground in a deserted alleyway.

“Hgh! Wh-what wa...?!”

My head keeps spinning as I sit up. Then the moment I look up, I completely forget everything I was about to say.

Standing before me is the kidnapper(?) himself.

He's wearing black combat gear that completely covers his entire body, which only highlights the white cloth tied around his waist and the white cape on his back, both embroidered with gold. His outfit seems more suited to a mage than a rough-and-tumble adventurer, or maybe even a cleric in formal attire for a festival. And his limbs are incredibly slender. It's hard to believe he lifted me up single-handedly.

But what catches my attention most are the elven ears peeking out from his long blond hair. His well-proportioned, scholarly face is unmistakably that of an elf.

“Y-you're...?!”

I'm on the verge of yelling, my mouth sputtering like mad as he adjusts his glasses, staring down at me all the while.

“Don't make a fuss. If you shout, I'll crush your throat.”

My throat?!

I turn pale, realizing that isn't an idle threat. He could really do it. I start to tremble like a cornered rabbit under his gaze.

"I'm taking you away now. You have no right to object," he explains simply.

It is such an extreme statement that I don't know how to respond.

That's just a natural reaction, though. In Orario, this man is undoubtedly top class when it came to strength.

Even I know his face.

"H-Hedin Selrand..."

Also known as Hildsleif—one of *Freya Familia*'s first-tier adventurers!



I've been kidnapped—or at least pulled along so fast that normal people wouldn't be able to keep up—to a place surprisingly close to *Hestia Familia*'s current home.

We're currently in the sixth district in the southwest quarter.

More specifically, we're sitting inside the chic Wish Café, located at the corner of a complex bottleneck.

"The black tea here is delicious. I come here often in my free time."

Hedin, the first-tier adventurer who brought me here, is holding his teacup and sipping at his warm tea elegantly, as if there's nothing amiss.

"Best of all, I've become well acquainted with the owner. It is far more accommodating than noisier, less refined venues. Take now, for instance."

The café has been completely cleared out, leaving just Hedin and me and the bespectacled elven proprietor behind the counter who seems to be reading a book without a care in the world. As if what is going on between us is of no concern to him. The CLOSED FOR BUSINESS sign had been out on the door even before we entered the shop, so maybe this is all according to plan.

The interior is on the small side, but it's tastefully decorated, with flowers and plants placed all around. Many thick, complicated-looking books spill from the wooden shelves lining the walls. The building itself is wood as well, lending the space an atmosphere that many elves would appreciate.

The truth is, I've been here once—no, twice before. The first time was with Hermes and Mikoto to talk about buying Haruhime's freedom. And the second time was when Finn had sounded me out about proposing to Lilly.

Unlike either of those visits, I'm more tense than I've ever been

before. The reason is obvious, I guess. One of the strongest adventurers in the city with whom I've basically never really spoken before dragged me here under the threat of violence.

"U-ummm...so what business did you have with me...?" I ask nervously, my tongue threatening to trip over itself.

Sitting across the beautifully crafted table, Hedin sets his teacup down on a saucer and fixes his coral-red eyes on me.

"It has to do with Lady Syr, of course."

I gulp without thinking. It was just a hunch, but I sort of had a feeling that might be it.

Hörn delivered the letter just yesterday, too.

But *Lady Syr*...

"U-umm, is Syr...somehow connected to *Freya Familia*?"

After counting Hedin here, plus the incident with Vana Freya, it seems pretty clear that several of their familia's highest-level members have some kind of connection to Syr. Guard duty, honorifics...It's almost like they're treating her like a princess.

Who in the world is Syr really?

I can't help wondering even though I had never really thought about it before.

"That's not something you need to know."

And my question is curtly shot down.

The sharp gaze staring me down is overwhelming.

"Besides, what would you do if you knew? Even if she had some sort of secret, would you treat her differently because of it?"

I'm taken aback. His pointed questions force me to think hard on the matter.

He's right...even if I knew how she was connected to *Freya Familia*, would that really change anything?

___No, it wouldn't.

It wouldn't change what she's given me or how she's helped me. I answer with complete sincerity.

"No...I would never do that."

My lips move on their own, revealing how I truly feel.

Is that an answer that will satisfy him? Hedin scoffs, but he doesn't berate me any further.

"I'm aware you've received a letter from her. And that you've somehow been chosen for a rendezvous during the Goddess Festival. As such, I've come to judge you."

Seems like we've finally reached the main topic at hand, though it's clear he thinks this is all a huge waste of his time. It feels like each and every word that comes out of his mouth is a barb aimed directly at me. It's bad enough that I start to shudder, but...what does he mean "judge" me?

J-judge me how?

“...”

He does nothing but stare at me.

“Wh-what is it?” I ask, bewildered.

His eyes are already drilling holes into me, but he doesn’t let up. Right when I can barely stand it any longer, he begins.

“You are lacking in character. Your conduct is crude. The exact opposite of refinement. An utter rube.”

“Hgh?!”

“Your speech is unbearable on the ears. Your lack of sophistication is plain to see.”

“Fgh?!”

“And more than anything, that expression of yours is utterly idiotic. It’s a source of irritation even just sitting across from you like this. If I were a woman, I would spit upon the very idea of a tryst with you, vulgar as it might be. I would scoff at the very idea.”

“Gah?!”

A sudden storm of critiques!

My body crumples like he pummeled my gut. If a beautiful elven lady had told me that so bluntly, it would’ve ruined me!

Hedin props his head up, his elbow on the armrest and his legs crossed. This must be what it feels to have a king pass judgment on you. And all that with an utterly disappointed gaze, making it clear he’s found me lacking.

Agh, this is soooo bad! I just wanna die!

“...However, she is the one who chose you. It is not my place to object,” he adds. That last bit seemed more for himself than me.

Adjusting his glasses, Hedin resumes his interrogation.

“What do you intend to wear on the day of? What are your specific plans for the event? Have you settled on any places to visit with her yet?”

“Eh? Eh?!”

“I’m telling you to lay out your plans to please Lady Syr, you simpleton. Is your mind dimmer than a brute’s?”

There’s no respite.

His words are scathing! This is on a whole other level from Lilly’s scolding! What did I do to deserve this?!

W-wait, more importantly...!

“Hold on a minute, please! I haven’t even decided yet whether to accept—?!”

“Fool. As if you ever had a choice. You may only weep in joy at the honor you’ve been bestowed.”

“Weep in what?!”

“If I were forced to phrase it as a choice, then your options are to

either offer Lady Syr the greatest joy this mortal realm has to offer or otherwise grant her eternal happiness. One or the other.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?!”

That’s not even a choice!

I have no idea what to make of the outrageous situation I’ve found myself in—but then Hedin’s expression goes still.

“If, perchance, you are fool enough to turn down her invitation, both you and all of *Hestia Familia* will be erased.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh?!”

The elven shopkeeper is still just reading his book, entirely undisturbed by either that cold pronouncement or my shout.

I bet this is how it feels to be a villager kneeling before a king’s throne and getting the death sentence. The blood drains from my face, and it feels like the end of the world has arrived.

The white elf sitting there dignified and composed as he delivers that pronouncement—that’s the epitome of a tyrant.

He’s serious. He really means it!

There’s no doubt that *Freya Familia*’s full power would be able to wipe me (and the rest of the familia) off the face of the earth!

I can’t say no!

Before even getting a chance to talk with Syr herself, it’s already been decided for me that I’m taking her out on a date!

“Her wish is equivalent to the goddess’s divine will,” Hedin says as a swirl of emotions crosses my face. “If she desires it, we shall move as her arms and legs. Even if it would mean becoming pariahs, we would still do it from the shadows.”

It was almost like he’s swearing an oath, shutting off any possible route of escape for me.

I can’t stop sweating.

An overwhelming sense of danger wells up inside me.

I have a dream. A person I’m chasing after.

If I go on a date without even mentioning that—i-it’d be bad!

That might just be a line that can’t be uncrossed...!

“U-um?! There is someone I—”

That instant, his right hand clamps down on my face faster than lightning can strike.

“?!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, you buffoon,” he says, standing up as he lifts me out of my chair, legs dangling underneath me. “On the day of the rendezvous, all you need to do is look at Lady Syr and no one else. Attachment to other women or even imagining the face of anyone other than Lady Syr will not be tolerated. Such vulgar thoughts are unnecessary. Think of nothing but her. There is nothing beyond pleasing her. She is the very center of your little world right

now.”

I kick my legs haplessly like a rabbit grabbed by its ears, but it’s no use! I can’t do anything as Hedin unleashes a stream of terrifying warnings.

He swings his arm out to the side, sending me rolling across the floor as I squawk in surprise. Looking up, I see an elf far more terrifying than any monster staring down at me with an ice-cold gaze.

“I suppose it’s no use. As I suspected, merely evaluating you won’t be enough. Your mindset, your understanding of the proper way to escort a lady—everything will need to be remodeled.”

“Wait, what does *that* mean?!”

“For the five days from now until the festival, you won’t have spare time even for sleep.”

“I—I have things to do with my familia, though...!”

“Fool. Which is more important, Lady Syr or playing family with your so-called friends?”

Argh, it’s no good! Words can’t get through to him! He’s just like Lyu—an elf who holds fast no matter what!

A shadow falls across me as I lay collapsed helplessly on the ground. Tears well up in my eyes and the blood drains from my cheeks, but he pays no heed as he delivers his proclamation.

“I will demonstrate my loyalty. Nothing more and nothing less. Prepare yourself.”

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh?!



“Has Bell not come back yet?! It’s night already!”

“He headed out for the tavern this morning. We looked all around for him, but...”

“Lilly went to The Benevolent Mistress! But they said Mr. Bell hadn’t come by today...! Ms. Syr seemed to be genuinely unaware of anything!”

“I asked Lady Aisha, but they couldn’t find him anywhere, either...!”

“Where the heck did you go, Beeeell?!”

“Lady Hestia! A letter addressed from Bell has arrived!”

“Really, Mikoto?! Let me see it!”

*In order to save our familia, I’ve decided to take Syr out on a date.
Please don’t come looking for me.
Help.*

“Do you want us to search for you or not?!”

“What does taking Syr out on a date have to do with saving the familia?!”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...! Ms. Haruhime, reach out to Lord Miach and Lord Takemikazuchi with a rabbit-search request, please! It’s urgent!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

Hestia Familia’s home was in an uproar beneath the moonlight when their pet rabbit failed to come home.

In the end, Bell Cranell was not found until the day of the festival.



Dear Gramps,

I used to like pretty elves, but now I think they’re scary.

Elves

Scary

I have learned what it truly means to be cornered. It got so bad that even basic thoughts vanished as soon as they appeared in my mind. Miss Eina’s lessons, Aiz’s training, and Lyu’s morning practice all seem like cute little games compared to the hell I had to go through.

There can’t be anything worse than *remodeling*.

“Your posture is miserable. Tighten your core. Now watch yourself in the mirror while practicing your enunciation. We are working on both your articulation and your expression.”

“Good morning Syr good afternoon Syr good evening Syr you look pretty Syr you look cute Syr you look beautiful Syr Syr Syr please save me Syr.”

“Is that ugly expression supposed to pass for a smile?”

“Agvh?!”

I’m standing in front of a mirror reciting the same lines over and over while Hedin constantly checks my posture and smile. He also consistently kicks me once every ten seconds or so. My mind is breaking down. It’s getting harder and harder to differentiate between the increasingly worn-down me in the mirror and the real me.

“I’m going to drill all ten books of elven scriptures into that head of yours. You have two hours. Tie the relevant information to your interest in heroes. You’ll understand faster if you project the characters that appear onto yourself.”

“Yes, Master! Understood, Master!”

“Quiet. You’re too loud.”

“Ngh?!...Understood, Master!!”

Hedin's orders are absolute. The only response I'm allowed is "Yes, sir!" or "Understood, sir!" He didn't demand it or anything, but I sort of naturally ended up calling him Master.

"For the remaining three days, you will hole up here in the Dungeon. You will devote your everything to hunting monsters and women."

"Ehhh?!"

"What are you imagining now, you degenerate?"

"Agh?! I-I'm sorry, sir!"

His training regimen is entirely dedicated to all there is to know about dates. The maxims are that women cost money, so naturally a date will incur expenses; that suggesting a date that doesn't cost any money is a doomed plan from the outset; and that "spending money is the most efficient way to demonstrate your sincerity." These lessons were drilled into me so intensely that I wanted to cry. As a dating amateur, I hunted and hunted and hunted monsters to amass funds to cover the date's expected costs (I'm so sorry, any monsters who might become Xenos). And along the way, I targeted female adventurers.

"I'm going to send a pass parade toward that party of women. You will save them gallantly. We'll use the suspension-bridge effect."

"But that's just wrong, Master!"

"I will have you cultivate the resolve necessary to please Lady Syr, no matter what it takes, imbecile."

"Hebsh?!"

"You are too inexperienced with women. Learn how to touch, how to laugh, how to lead. If they find you likable above a certain threshold, they also won't be on guard against you."

Real-world training involves escorting women adventurers. My conscience is killing me, but I feign innocence while saving all the women adventurers hit by Master's pass parades. I rescue them gallantly just like he told me to and then, filled with guilt, I flex every bit of the gentlemanly behavior he beat into me and watch as the adventurers who were initially screaming in fear start to blush.

"Are you all okay? You aren't hurt, are you?"

"R-Rabbit Foot?!" "What?! No way! The record holder?!"

"Number one on the Promising Futures List, number three on the Marry Into Money Early! List, and number seven on the Please Call Me 'Big Sister' List?! That Bell Cranell?!"

What is she even talking about...?

This is also training to be ready for every possible sort of reaction. There are differing levels of sensitivity to consider, as well as potentially irrational behavior, irregulars, and more that I have to effectively handle. I use everything Master taught me in this series of real-world tests. I do it again and again and again with so, so many

people. The meaning of service and devotion is hammered into me. These lessons are more difficult, more embarrassing, and more painful to handle than Master's fist of judgment.

"You know, I had you pegged all wrong, Rabbit Foot! Who knew you were such a nice guy!"

"And so naive! There's this innocence that shines through every once in a while! Plus the way you get embarrassed, it's like you're trying to make us fall for you!"

"Umm...Just once is okay, but could you please call me 'big sister'? Hah...hah..."

"Ahh, ha-ha-ha-ha...W-well then, we've reached the twelfth floor, so you should be okay from here, right?"

"Yep! Thanks for coming along with us, Rabbit Foot!"

"We can make it back by ourselves if it's just the upper floors!"

To wrap it all up, this is to practice seeing women off at the end of the date. Bringing your date safely home after the first date and whatnot.

"...Hey, wait a minute? Are you free tonight?"

"Eh?"

"...! Since you helped us out, I was thinking it would be nice to pay you back somehow!"

"Yeah, yeah! We were thinking..."

""""Why don't you join us for dinner tonight?""""

"Ah, thank you, but my familia is strict about its curfew. My goddess will get upset."

"—*Soldiers of lightning.*"

"Gah?!"

Training to not disappoint women. Whenever a woman's opinion of me drops, Master's ultra-short-cast lightning bolt isn't far behind.

Training, training, training...it's all training. There isn't a single moment to spare, and I'm not even allowed to sleep. Every lesson is crammed and beaten into me, and if I make any mistakes, I get kicked, roasted, and yelled at over and over as I get remodeled. The crunch is so intense, I don't even have time to feel sick. I can confidently say these past five days have been the most grueling I've ever experienced.

And at long last, there's only one more to go.

"For your final lesson, you will narrow down your target and perform a dry run for the festival. The training ground will be Rivira. It is offensive to do so, but you are to treat whatever riffraff you decide upon as a hypothetical Lady Syr."

"Y-yes, Master...understood..."

We've come to the safety point of the middle floors—the eighteenth floor's Under Resort.

I almost broke into tears when I spotted the brilliant gleam coming from the crystals, reminding me of the light of the surface.

At this point, I've been carrying on for five whole days without a wink of sleep, plus my body is worn out and beaten up. As an upper-class adventurer, the psychological exhaustion is more concerning than the physical aches. Forcing myself to keep going for so long has pushed me to the brink of mental collapse. I can't even measure the passage of time anymore.

The only warning I get before being kicked into a forest spring is "You stink." Not that it's a new observation, but Hedin really is merciless. As soon as I'm out, Master douses me in cologne and only then do I finally set foot in Rivira itself.

"Currently, there is a sweet treat being sold only here in Rivira: the Tapioca Deluxe Hyper Dungeon Sandwich."

"Hy-per...what? Tapi...? Deluxe...?"

"Incidentally, it's an absurd product that will only be sold to couples."

"Why?!"

"Additionally, the couple may be two men or two women."

"I'm so confused!"

"The shop's owner has been blathering on about 'Is it wrong to look for heartwarming moments in the Dungeon?'"

I have so many things I want to ask that I don't really know where to begin. I guess all this research was done beforehand, since Master is giving the instructions so easily without a reference.

"You are to engage the next woman you encounter and go buy it. Then the two of you are to eat together and share your dishes with each other."

"Are you serious?!"

"I told you this will be a hypothetical date with Lady Syr, did I not? During your tryst, you will undoubtedly be out walking around and eating at some point. You need to familiarize yourself. Put another way, if you can convince her to be comfortable doing that with you, then she has let you into her heart. After that, you will perform a dry run of the date here in this town."

I'm horrified by the task I've been given. I'm not that good with sweet stuff to begin with...not that I could get away with saying that now. I can't bring myself to go against Master's wishes, and he wouldn't let me even if I tried. My head hangs in resignation.

After he orders me to begin, I steel my resolve and walk off alone. The target shop is in the crystal plaza at the center of town. It has an elaborate and colorful billboard, so there's no mistaking it.

"Huh...? B-Bell?!"

"Eh? Cassandra?"

To my surprise, I run right into Cassandra and Daphne from *Miach Familia*.

"What are doing here? Lilliluka and the others are worried about you," Daphne asks.

"Ah...ha-ha-ha...I was forced into taking on something you could call a quest..." I struggle to get my words out.

I can't exactly say that I'm training for my date in the Dungeon without running the risk of letting Syr find out what I'm doing...

They look confused, but I hurriedly change the topic.

"Why are the two of you here?"

"Ah, Cassandra had this treat she reeeally wanted to try and she just wouldn't give it a rest. Hyper something deluxe or whatever... Anyway, we came here looking for that, since the Goddess Festival starts tomorrow."

"W-wait, it's not what you think! I swear I'm not a glutton, Bell!"

"You were insanely excited to try it with double extra cream, weren't you?"

"Daphneeeeeeeeeee!"

Cassandra blushes and her eyes water as she keeps hitting Daphne. I laugh awkwardly as I watch them, but then I have a thought.

"Why don't we buy one together?"

"...Eh? Ehhhh?!"

Master said to invite the next woman I met, and it looks like we are both after the same thing. And maybe doing this exercise with someone I know will make it easier on me, too.

It's almost funny how taken aback Cassandra is by the suggestion.

"U-umm, they only let c-c-couples buy the Dungeon Sandwich... th-that was why I asked Daphne to...the t-two of us...a couple...?"

"The truth is I've been wanting to try it out, too...Or would you prefer not to go with me?"

The courteous smile Master had hammered into me comes out instinctively. All of a sudden, there's a *pop* and Cassandra's face turns bright red. I only have a moment to flinch before she starts nodding her head enthusiastically.

"I'll go with you! Please! Let's! I'd love to!"

"I-in that case..."

My eyes dart back and forth nervously as Cassandra and I head to the shop. And for some reason, Daphne is following along as well, looking amazed as she watches us.

The shop is all wood, and the shopkeeper is a big man, even bigger than Bors. His face is gruffer than I would have imagined for someone selling a dessert called a hyper whatever, but when he sees us walk in, he looks us up and down—or rather, he studies Cassandra,

who covers her red face with her hands and groans—and then looks away with a laugh and says, “You pass.”

What’s even going on...?

I use my familia emblem to order two extra-large sandwiches.

Ugh...! I thought it would be something crazy based on the name, but this is way bigger than I expected...!

There are honey clouds, goldenberries, and other fruits found in the Dungeon as well as a dozen different creams and other ingredients squeezed between two pieces of bread. It has so many ingredients that it would be slipping out on all sides if it weren’t for the paper wrapping. Glancing over at Cassandra, who asked for an order with double cream and red bean jam, I see her eyes sparkling like a child’s.

Then, noticing my amazement—or maybe misunderstanding it—she looks at our two sandwiches and blushes as she holds hers out.

“W-would you like to try mine?”

Cute. She is so cute blushing like that, but...my cheek twitches.

All that sweetness is going to kill me. I was planning to gently turn down her offer, but I can’t. I notice Master’s merciless gaze out of the corner of my eye ordering me to do it.

I honestly want to cry a little as I ready myself. Summoning my strength, I gently take her hand and bring the sandwich toward my mouth.

“Fh?!”

Keeping a hold of Cassandra’s hand, I take a bite.

My face is hot. I am so embarrassed even my ears are burning. And Cassandra is just as red. But thanks to that, I don’t really notice the sweetness, and I’m somehow able to swallow it down.

Cassandra’s eyes are wide, and she looks like steam might pour out of her ears at any moment.

“...Would you like to try?”

“Eh?”

“Try mine, I mean...”

It is impossibly embarrassing, but I can feel Master’s eyes stabbing into my back, ordering me to land the follow-up attack. My face is crimson as I hold out my Dungeon sandwich. Cassandra, after taking a second to de-petrify, purses her lips and then opens them slightly.

“A...ahhhh.”

She takes a small bite of cream. She is quiet while she chews. And also red.

There’s a little bit of cream on her cheek.

—Something like this happened at Monsterphilia with my goddess, too.

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, I reach out naturally and wipe the cream off her cheek with my finger. Do not allow shame to befall the

woman you're escorting. That was what Hedin had taught me.

“—My cheek was licked by a rabbit—the prediction was truuuuuuuuuuuuuuue...”

“Wh-what?! Cassandra?!”

Suddenly, she passes out without any warning.

I immediately catch her as she collapses, holding her soft body. I guess she reached her embarrassment limit, because she fainted and fell right into my arms.

“Don't give me a heart attack...” Daphne says wearily.

“What a pushover. But that's fine, too,” the shopkeeper says, a big smile on his face as he closes his eyes.

“This isn't any use for practice,” Hedin says as he calmly prepares his next plan.



The ground was lit by bright moonlight.

A solemn mood lingered in Orario after the conclusion of Elegia, but privately, excitement and anticipation were starting to build.

The Goddess Festival was only one day away, making this the eve before the festival.

“...”

Lyu had rolled up her sleeves and was quietly washing dishes at The Benevolent Mistress.

She stood in place with her head down as she quickly performed the task with a practiced hand.

Dish after dish after dish...

“How long are you going to keep washing, foolish girl?”

“Ngh?!”

A boulder-like fist came down on Lyu's head.

Spinning around, she saw the tavern's towering dwarf owner, Mia.

“M-Mama Mia...?”

“The shop's been closed awhile now. How many times do you have to rinse the dishes before you'll feel better?”

“Eh...?” Lyu was taken aback by that.

The lights in the tavern had already been dimmed, and she was all alone in the back. The mountain of stacked plates had already disappeared, and Lyu had been working from left to right and back, repeatedly rinsing them in an endless loop. She stared at her hands in shock.

“What are you so preoccupied with to do something so stupid? Sheesh...Did you revert to the good-for-nothing you were back when I first hired you?”

“Guh...?!”

Mia sighed heavily. Lyu couldn't muster any response, though, having done something so shameful.

Her pale cheeks took on a slightly reddish tint, an expression of embarrassment she would never show in front of Bell or the others.

Lyu had been almost lifeless all day, or rather for the past five days. And it had gotten worse the closer the festival came. Even without anyone else telling her, Lyu knew fully well why.

“If even you're like this, then I'm worried what'll happen once the festival actually arrives. What a mess. And that airhead even said she was planning to go out and play...” Mia sighed in annoyance.

Lyu was surprised. As her coworker's face sprang to mind, Lyu spoke up before she had time to think.

“...Will you let her go, Mama Mia?”

Mia glanced back at her.

“Do you want me to stop her?”

It was a simple question, but Lyu felt like someone had just closed a hand around her heart.

“N-no! I don't want to get in Syr's way! I'd never...! It's just...”

Just...what?

She had no idea how to put everything in her heart into words. Her feelings were like a fairy dancing off in some faraway woods. If she followed, it would simply disappear. Still, Lyu had enough presence of mind to notice she had been trembling for some time now. She did not want to lose either Syr's smile or Bell's presence in her life.

I really did betray my friend...

She remembered what Syr had asked her just a few days ago.

I really did fall for Bell...

And finally she came to terms with her feelings.

This was what had been driving her crazy ever since she had returned from the Dungeon.

She had refused to admit it before, and this was quite possibly the worst time to do so. The sweet, warm feeling that should have been making her heart ache was more like an iceberg rising from the freezing ocean's depths. Now, she had no idea how to face either Bell or Syr.

Lyu squeezed her suddenly chilly arms.

“...You really are the same hardheaded elf you were before. Five years and still nothing's changed,” Mia muttered in exasperation.

“Huh...?”

“You could learn a little something from us dwarves, you know.”

Saying that, she pulled a bottle out of one of the cabinets and pushed it into Lyu's arms. It took Lyu a moment to realize it was one

of Mia's fruit liqueurs that she had been saving for a special occasion.

"Wh-why?"

"Have yourself a drink and then hurry off to bed. Dwelling on it like that is just a waste of time."

A nightcap?

Realizing that Mia was showing concern in her own way, Lyu was struck by an indescribable feeling that came with unbidden memories of a mother she had forgotten some time ago. Her sky-blue eyes quivered, and her heart felt just a bit lighter.

"...If I could stop her, then I'd pin her down even if I had to tie her up, though. It's clear as day that stupid girl's being unreasonable."

"...?"

"Picking up where we left off," Mia grouched. "Also, the most dangerous one isn't her. It's the people around her."

"Eh?"

"I'm saying there's no telling what all those overprotective dumbasses who hover over that foolish girl might do. If they cause problems for my tavern, I'll duke it out with 'em to the end, but it wouldn't be worth much. Pisses me off how little it'd do."

Mia was practically talking to herself as she furrowed her brow and glared off in the direction of Babel. Lyu looked up in surprise as the dwarven barkeep swiveled back around.

"Anyway, that fool isn't here."

And then she jabbed Lyu's chest with her fat finger.

"And you won't get off the hook easy if you skip out, ya hear?"



"Is there any way we can skip work tomorrow during the festival?!"

Ahnya's voice rang out.

It was late in the night by the time they had finished work for the day and closed up the tavern.

Unaware of Lyu's anguish, Ahnya, Chloe, and Runoa were having a secret meeting in the adjoining building.

"I can't help wondering what Syr and white-hair are going to do meow! Plus I want to try lots of tasty fruits and stuff at the festival, too!"

"I'm pretty sure that's what you're really after."

Ahnya roared indignantly as Runoa gave her a dubious look. But then Runoa sighed and muttered:

"It is a big event and I know it'll be busy at the tavern...but still, working straight through all three days of the festival is rough. There's no time off scheduled, either..."

The Goddess Festival was one of Orario's most extravagant, lively

holidays. Unlike Monsterphilia, which was centered more in Orario's east, in the second district where the amphitheater was, the upcoming festivities would happen all throughout the city. Food stalls were not the only attractions, either. The Benevolent Mistress and all the other pubs and bars would undoubtedly be a sight to see.

"Mama Mia's gonna work us to death! Meow!"

"To tie down freedom-loving cats, aaaah, knowing not the fear of god! Dwarves are truly terrifying creatures! Just work Runoa to the bone and leave this cat out of it!"

"I'll whup your ass."

The three girls were getting fairly worked up. Ahnya grumbled, Chloe beseeched the very heavens, and Runoa readied a fist.

The tavern was already home to a colorful cast of characters, but these three were particularly problematic, and it went without saying that Mia was heaping work onto them as punishment. However, that possibility never crossed their minds.

The three of them tried to pool their knowledge as they devised ways to sneak away from the tavern and tail Syr and Bell on their date.

"We're going to need help to keep track of them. With enough hands, the tavern can get by even if we disappear, meaning no one will notice immediately. Probably. Maybe. So, if we hire people for a part-time shift, we should be able to safely get away during a break..."

"We don't have the money to hire someone for that, meow. And Mama Mia isn't planning on hiring any part-timers, either! Stupid Runoa!"

"I'm seriously gonna send you flying! The whole point of this is to try to figure out some way of dealin' with that problem, isn't it?!"

For various reasons, all three of them were indebted to Mia and their pay was so low that it was comparable to a certain part-timer goddess's.

Then, right as Runoa started winding up her arm in anger at being called an idiot by Ahnya, who was known as the "idiot cat" by her coworkers—

"—Basically, what we need is a sacrifice who will do what we say, meow."

The black cat grinned viciously.

"...Do you have something in mind?"

"I'm sure it's just another sleazy idea..."

Runoa and Ahnya turned a dubious gaze on their villainous colleague, who had a devilish glint in her eyes.

Chloe touched her finger to her lips as she grinned wickedly.

"I've got a surefire plan, meow."



“Is this for the best, Milady?” Ottar asked.

His patron goddess was relaxing in her room on the top floor of Babel, standing in the center of the city.

The night sky was dark, making it easy to spot the glimmering moon from the summit of the giant tower that was the city’s landmark.

Freya lounged in her luxurious chair, enjoying some wine as she looked out the window.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Regarding the Goddess Festival.”

“...You heard from Hörn?”

“Yes, Milady.” Ottar nodded.

The head chamberlain who adored the goddess was not present. Her primary role was to attend to Freya, not to converse with her. She preemptively took care of any duties that would be inappropriate for members of the opposite sex like Ottar to handle. She was surely in a position where she could come in with an attendant if Freya rang her bell.

When Freya was enjoying her wine and looking out over Orario at moments like this, it was Ottar’s task to remain at her side. He would go along with her whims, reply with short but honest responses, and from time to time provide recommendations or admonitions. That was both a duty and an honor only afforded him, as captain of the familia.

Ordinarily, he would never broach a topic himself, but just this once, he pressed the matter.

“I heard that...it is a contest to see which of you will win Bell Cranell.”

“A contest, huh? It is a rather aggressive stance for her, isn’t it?”

“...Did you really accept that challenge, Milady?”

“Yes. She said that she had been drawn to Bell, too, after all. What a surprise...”

Freya chuckled as if there was something amusing about that development.

Ottar remained silent. His reflection was clear in the window’s single, seamless pane of glass, his expression plainly one of doubt as to whether that was really the correct choice.

“A reflection? Something shared? Or perhaps a link? Does her heart follow mine?”

“...I could not even begin to imagine.”

“I suppose not.”

Freya did not seem at all bothered as she raised the glass to her lips.

Ottar attempted to continue the conversation.

“Allen and the others have expressed their displeasure with regards to the festival.”

“It’s just Allen’s usual chatter, right? Tell him I said to go along with Syr’s game.”

“Yes, Milady.”

“I suppose it would be a waste of time to say you don’t need to provide any protection?”

“Yes, Milady. If you could forgive this one transgression.”

“Fine, fine. I don’t know how many of you are planning to drop in, but keep it to just children who are second-tier or higher. It should be fine to leave the command to Hedin, right?”

“That should be sufficient, Milady.”

A practical, businesslike confirmation. Stalling before touching upon the main topic.

Ottar hesitated in his heart, but steeled himself to question her divine will.

“What is it that you desire, Milady?”

Freya did not immediately respond. The cool moonlight filtering through the glass window illuminated her immaculate form. After a moment’s pause, she gave her answer.

“My wish is unchanged,” she said. “I will make Bell mine, no matter what it takes. That is all.”

That was her divine will. That was her wish.

In which case, all there was for Ottar to do was close his mouth and stand there in silence.

“Ottar. Whose side are you on?”

“...”

“She approached you for support, didn’t she?”

The goddess’s eyes saw all. It was impossible to lie in the presence of a deity. Ottar considered remaining silent, but he realized that to do so in this situation would be no different from acknowledgment.

“All that I do, I do for your sake, Milady.”

“You know, the way you say that makes it sound like you might cooperate with her if it were for my sake.”

Such things are beyond my control.

And this time, Ottar closed his eyes, neither confirming nor denying, simply admitting his defeat.

The silver-haired goddess giggled as she raised her glass in the pale moonlight.

“The harvest festival is usually so boring...I wonder how it will go this year.

“Even I’m not certain.”

The goddess made one last comment as she let her thoughts turn

to the unknown.

MONOLOGUE



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MONOLOGUE II



I began my careful preparation.

On the day of the festival, I would only have a very limited amount of time to act. My wish needed to be fulfilled before the clock struck twelve. That meant my plans would have to be set in motion before the festival even commenced.

For starters, I requested aid from some of her followers.

First was Ottar. I sent him word of the situation by going through one of the maids. If I had reached out to him directly, it would have drawn suspicion. Even if she saw through all, it was important not to draw needless suspicion from the other followers who act as her eyes and ears.

After receiving my message, he came to speak with me in secret.

As I laid out my thoughts without varnish, he remained silent. His expression was intense as always even as he pursed his lips. It was almost cute, and a little funny.

I held in my laughter as I asked him:

“Would you please consider cooperating with me? Just one day—no, even a single instant is enough.”

It had been a gamble whether he would agree, but I had reason to believe he might.

Much like how I had realized the goddess's true wish, he also sensed it. And he was always pondering what actions and what choices would serve the goddess's interests in the truest sense. Even if only subconsciously.

In this situation, my existence carried the explosive potential to completely change the goddess's future. The key to realizing the possibility that had crossed his mind at least once.

I gambled on the slimmest hope that this stone-faced warrior would come to the same conclusion.

It would be difficult to recruit anyone else.

Allen and the others would be particularly problematic. Their loyalty was reserved for the goddess alone in every possible way. Zealots like them would do everything in their power to stop me no matter what if they discovered my plan, regardless of the justification.

After a long silence during which I looked into his eyes in prayer, the boaz attendant nodded his head.

—*I'm sorry.*

The apology only rang out in my heart.

I hated myself for attempting to deceive both the goddess and him. But still I remained steadfast and true to my wish.

 CHAPTER 3
HARVEST FESTIVAL

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CHAPTER 3

HARVEST FESTIVAL

Clear blue as far as the eye could see. There were a number of white clouds floating here and there like the seeds dotting a fruit. Compared to the summertime, the clouds were higher up and much, much smaller to the eye. A cool breeze blew through the wide-open sky.

The fall weather was pleasant. Perfect weather for a festival.

“As you can see, we’ve been blessed with a wonderful day. It looks like even the fickle gods of weather are in a good mood today.”

A goddess’s gentle voice projected by a magic-stone amplifier reached every corner of Orario. The source was at the heart of the city, in Central Park at the foot of the chalk-white tower.

This was where all eight arteries of the city converged, a place where tens of thousands of people could comfortably gather.

Today, however, the plaza looked different from usual. There were pagoda-like stone towers with altars at their bases erected in the north, south, east, and west around Babel—places of worship.

“The long-awaited season has come again. Winter passed, seeds matured into sprouts, and then the shoots that grew were harvested. It all seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. How did the year find you?” Demeter’s voice carried across the city.

The four tall altars were crowded by countless humans and demi-humans, all of them gazing up at the four goddesses atop each towering structure.

Damia, Hathor, Freya, and Demeter—goddesses of the harvest who resided in Orario and were living symbols of the festival.

Suddenly, Demeter lowered her gaze.

“A great many things came to pass this past year—many of them frightening, and many of them sad. A year is but an instant to us deities, but I will surely never forget these few short months.”

There was a desolate tone in her voice. The dregs of grief from ELEGIA. Around the city, people’s thoughts turned to the uproar at Monsterphilia, the destruction of the red-light district, the armed monsters that appeared on the surface, and various other incidents that had occurred.

A momentary hush fell over the entire city. Then the goddess

broke into a smile. She raised her head to look out from the altar, regarding the children staring up at her with joy on her face.

“And that is all the more reason why we should appreciate this moment for those with whom we’ve parted ways this year. Celebrate with hearts filled with gratitude for the abundance we enjoy.”

Excitement bloomed on every face in the listening crowd.

Demeter’s honey-colored hair fluttered as she opened her arms wide.

“We offer our thanks for the earth’s bounty—and declare the opening of the Goddess Festival!”

Woooooooooooooooooh!

Cheers rose throughout the city. What sounded like thunderous applause at first turned out to be fireworks set off by the Guild. And judging by the tricolor bursts of flame, ice, and lightning blooming overhead, spellcasters from some familia or another had decided to help out. Tendrils of white smoke rose up into the sky as the roaring display went on. With all the children letting their pent-up excitement come out, Orario was filled with sounds of celebration as the opening ceremony drew to a close. Energy thrummed in the Trading Post and the commercial district and even in the rebuilt slums of Daedalus Street.

The festival began with a proclamation from the goddesses, and it would end with one as well. And every year, the one who initiated the festivities was none other than Demeter, the goddess who maintained the largest agricultural enterprise in the city. There was no better deity to announce the harvest festival than the very goddess who brought abundance to Orario. Whether grains, vegetables, or fruits, *Demeter Familia*’s crops were what allowed Orario to flourish and profit.

And today was a day for all to laugh and play.

This was the beginning of the feast of plenty.



“Amazing...”

The cheers erupting all around the city can be easily heard wherever you are.

My first Goddess Festival. The first harvest season I’ve spent in Orario.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t excited by the thought of a huge festival being held in the city known as the center of the world.

Bards conjure pleasant melodies on strings and pipes, urging passersby to make the most of the festival and not waste any time.

I’d love to enjoy the festival to my heart’s content, but there’s

something just as important.

Honestly, I'm equal parts excited and nervous.

I'm standing in front of the bronze statues of a goddess, waiting for someone.

"Syr still isn't here..."

This is Amour Square, a spot paved with colorful flagstones while various flowers and plants brighten the space. There are lots of other people here besides me, and almost all of them—everyone other than me, actually—are couples snuggling together.

Incidentally, this is the same place I once waited to meet up with my goddess to enjoy a meal together (though that time Demeter and a few others followed after us and the whole thing ended up not happening). It's also rather close to Wish Café as well as the suggested meeting place noted in the second page of Syr's letter.

"Maybe I came a little too early...? No. Trust Master's lessons."

I am feeling a little nervous with the lovey-dovey mood around me, but I suppress my doubts. Hedin—the elf who I've come to call Master after that short stint in hell—appears in the back of my mind.

His training regimen was more demanding than anything Miss Eina ever put me through. I remember sitting at attention and absorbing Master's lessons designed for his incompetent pupil.

"It's absurd to even bother explaining it at this point, since it should obviously go without saying, but the battle begins long before you meet. Coming early, late, or just on time—they all affect a couple's power balance. It is a more complex and difficult match of stratagems than what an adventurer will face."

"M-more complex...?! Wh-what's the right choice, then?!"

"There is no single correct answer. Just as there are countless ways to deal with the multitude of monsters that you may encounter, the number of possibilities explodes when considering your and your partner's personalities and how they might come together. It is even possible for the weather on the day and the layout of the location to influence things."

"W-weather and geography, too...?!"

The number of things that I needed to factor in shocked me. I turned pale at just the thought of it. I could see how dating could be more difficult to master than adventuring. A date truly was like war—no, like the Dungeon!

Incidentally, maybe because he understood that I didn't know anything about the finer points of relationships between men and women and had too little knowledge to work with, Master seemed to helpfully compare everything to the Dungeon or adventurers when explaining things. It surprised me at first, but amazingly, I actually did seem to remember it a lot better when he did that.

Though he did scold me and glare at me like I was a walking pile

of trash while calling me a Dungeon fanatic. I wonder why?

"It is necessary to make full use of all one's techniques and tactics from the very start—however, in your case, messing around with pointless tricks is just a waste of time."

"Huh?"

"It doesn't suit your character. And above all, you are dealing with Lady Syr. She would see through a half-baked psychological gambit, and it would simply earn you bad marks. Because of that, you should instead emphasize that idiotic single-mindedness of yours."

"Meaning...?"

"Be at the meeting point before Lady Syr. No matter what. One hour early, three hours early, however long it takes. You are going to emphasize how you appear to be the very incarnation of pure innocence."

Master adjusted his glasses, looking like a wise general explaining his battle plan.

"Your aim for this festival will be to take and maintain the initiative in every regard. Nothing more."

And so, armed with that plan, I've staked out my position here in Amour Square five hours early. That said, the odd glances from people around me seem to be asking "How long has he been there?" and it's starting to get really, really uncomfortable. I take a deep breath in order to calm myself as I keep waiting.

I'll make it work. I won't waste the fruits of Master's training. And more than anything, if I don't succeed, I won't have a tomorrow. Time to protect *Hestia Familia*...!

"—Bell!"

A voice rings out like the starting bell.

Sensing that the moment has come, I steel myself before turning around—and for a moment, my breath catches. Syr is running over. I've never seen her look like this before.

It wouldn't surprise me if she said her dress was made specifically for this date. The skirt just barely reaches her knees and somehow still seems to emphasize her slender legs. There is a ribbon wrapped around her waist instead of a belt that just highlights her slim frame even more. She has a cute bolero jacket draped over her shoulders. And she is wearing a pair of pumps that suits her perfectly. Despite not wearing any makeup, she seems even more elegant and beautiful than usual. She never wears earrings normally, but for some reason I can feel my heart throb as I spot the telltale gleam of earrings behind her swaying blue-gray hair.

In short, she is utterly captivating.

"You're early! I was planning to arrive a little earlier myself, except I found you already here!"

I guess she'd been hurrying because her breathing is just a tiny bit

ragged and her cheeks are slightly flushed. She takes a pocket watch out of her handbag and smiles.

Cute. So cute.

I freeze, unable to respond, unable to think of anything else.

“...More importantly, Bell...Your clothes...”

Syr studies my outfit in amazement.

I’ve come fully armed for this date. A plain white shirt, a vest, and a deep red jacket. Plus a matching tie. I’m also wearing a properly fitted pair of pants and leather shoes. Anyone who knows how I normally dress would probably have been just as surprised as Syr. There are even white gloves to complete the outfit.

I’m covering so much skin that I probably look like a gentleman or a butler. Or maybe it just looks like an outfit chosen to match elven tastes. That would be a reasonable guess, since Master is the one who selected it. Apparently, I have no sense for clothes, since I only ever wore armor and combat gear—and because of my familia’s circumstances, I’ve never really had money to spend on clothes before. That’s why Master said, “*Do you intend to disappoint Lady Syr and ruin her impression of you all at once, you incompetent rube?*” with a scoff before taking the initiative and coordinating my hopeless clothing situation in the little time left before the festival.

The makeover didn’t stop at my clothes, either. I even have my hair swept back and out of my eyes.

I know it’s totally different from how I usually dress, so I can’t help but ask:

“D-do I look weird?”

“Eh? Ah, no, I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just...you look so different from normal, so I was a little surprised is all...” Syr responds, waving it off.

Her face seems almost a little red as she looks me over. I’d been too preoccupied by how she looked to notice her reaction until I finally managed to cool my head a bit. We were both thinking the exact same thing.

“Uh-huh, it’s definitely different from your usual look, but this isn’t bad...Yeah, it’s quite nice...and almost like you hit all the things I like about you with it...” Syr places her hand on her chin as she murmurs to herself.

Meanwhile, my heart is about to explode. There is something that Master told me I absolutely had to do. And he had also said that if I missed my first opening, I would get boxed in by embarrassment and never get another chance given how pathetic I was.

Seize the initiative.

That was what Master told me to do, so I work up my courage and hold out my hand.

“Shall we, Syr?”

“Eh?” Syr freezes when I make the offer.

“Let’s enjoy the festival together.”

I’m smiling right now, right?

My face hasn’t gotten weird because of my nerves, has it?

I tamp down the burning sensation in my ears as I look straight at her and say, “Let’s hold hands.”

I guess she hadn’t expected me to say that, because she’s gone completely still. I just catch yet another expression I’ve never seen before.

“.....Y-yes, please.”

Her eyes shift from my face to my hand and back before slowly... nervously, Syr sets her hand in mine. She is *definitely* blushing. She immediately looks down to hide it, but the rosy-red blooming on her cheeks is easy to spot.

Though it isn’t like I’m super calm and composed, either. My heart is pounding so hard that it might come flying out of my chest at any moment. It’s all because of the soft touch of her fingers I feel as I take her hand and we slowly, very slowly, begin to walk together.

It’s like the noisy world around us has stopped in place. As if everyone is looking at us.

No, it must be my imagination. It has to be. Let’s just go.

Do your best, me!

“Ah.”

Seize the initiative, seize the initiative, seize the initiative—as I desperately repeat Master’s maxim to myself, I freeze. There is something crucial that I forgot. Syr is understandably surprised when I suddenly stop and turn toward her. I look her right in the eye.

“You look absolutely lovely today, Syr!”

There’s no way to stop myself from blushing as I say it.

I smile to hide it as I carefully convey what I’m already thinking out loud.

This time, Syr’s cheeks turn a very obvious crimson.



A word about the activity around the city...

From the moment Demeter declared the start of festivities, Orario’s enthusiasm could not be contained. This was the long-awaited Goddess Festival. The eddies of noise were louder than ever, but they were not harsh on the ears: the pleasant footsteps pattering across the streets; playful, overwrought praise of the bounty of the earth; full bands appearing out of nowhere, trumpets and flutes blaring, drums thumping; dwarves dressed in formal attire singing with booming

voices coming from such small frames, drawing laughs and cheers in equal measure from the crowds.

Beneath the clear blue sky, everyone had the right to enjoy the holiday. The town had already come alive with sounds of celebration.

“—The neighborhood is so lively, so why do we have to work?!” a goddess’s cry rang out.

The source was West Main Street. Specifically, The Benevolent Mistress.

“Calling me out of the blue and just to help out at a tavern?! What’s the big idea?! Also, the amount of work is going to *kill* me! This isn’t just worse than Jyaga Maru Kun—it’s even worse than Hephaistos’s place!”

Hestia was running around taking orders in a tavern that was packed just like every other venue in the city. She was wearing a green waitress uniform and a white apron. It was unmistakably The Benevolent Mistress’s customary uniform. Her black hair was tied up and flipping around while her enormous breasts heaved, barely contained by the uniform, attesting to just how hard she was working. She was starting to swoon from how busy the bar had become.

“Quit complaining and get back to work, meow!”

“Did you forget we went out to help white-hair, meow?!”

“D-damn it! You’re not wrong!”

Chloe and Ahnya were taking advantage of her weak spot, so Hestia could do little besides struggle to bite back her tears.

It had all begun when they burst into Hearthstone Manor without warning. About a month ago, they had answered Hestia’s call for help, and now they had come to claim their reward—or more precisely, to call in a favor. Chloe and Ahnya aside, Runoa’s stance was more of a “It’s not like we did much more than going to pick them up from the deep floors.” Either way, the three of them had faced danger in coming to their aid, so Hestia and the rest of the familia could hardly refuse.

From the very first day of the festival—in other words since early that morning—they had been worked like so many pack mules.

“I had finally managed to get time off from my job, but what’s the point now?! Waaaaaah! Beeeeeelllllll!”

“Quit chatterin’ and put your back into it! Don’t you dare start slacking now!” the dwarf behind the counter roared.

“Eep?! Sorry boss!” The startled goddess jumped as she replied in a panic.

Mia worked everyone to the bone, whether mortal or not, and her angry shouts shook the very heavens. Hestia was powerless before her. She had already messed up and apologized dozens of times, becoming little more than a puppet who had no right to object.

“The utter lack of dignity...and yet, she’s our patron goddess. It almost makes Lilly want to cry...” Lilly sighed, unable to hide her exhaustion as she watched Hestia getting scolded again.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Even I’m terrified of that dwarf...though, did she really have to force me to make these uniforms...?”

Lilly was wearing a cute, smaller-sized uniform, but for Welf, who was busy hauling ale, all it reminded him of was his mental exhaustion as he recalled Mia’s demand: “*I don’t have uniforms for prums or men, so make your own!*” A part of him still felt like there was something very strange about taking the knowledge he had gained making battle clothes for Bell and using it to fashion uniforms for a part-time job at a tavern.

“Goddess Hestia, everyone...I’m truly sorry...”

Meanwhile, Lyu just looked miserable.

She had fallen into the deep floors with Bell and had been rescued alongside him, so seeing *Hestia Familia* being put through the wringer at the tavern pained her conscience. If it were a burden she could bear alone, she would have far preferred to atone for it herself. Unfortunately, the harsh reality of The Benevolent Mistress had no room for such fanciful generosity.

“It’s nothing for you to worry yourself over, Lyu! We’ve all been saved by you several times before, even aside from that expedition. What better time than now to repay our debts? Be it a part-time job or whatever else!” Mikoto, who was doing the best of the new hires, responded cheerfully.

It had been disappointing to have to cancel her plans after she had battled her embarrassment to invite Takemikazuchi to wander the festival together, but above all else, Mikoto had a strong sense of duty.

The girl had endured all sorts of training while also struggling against poverty in the Far East, which gave her the skills to cook, wash, clean, and do virtually anything else well enough to get even Mia to begrudgingly say, “*Heh, so there is someone who can do real work after all, huh?*” An all-rounder even as an adventurer, this was an area where Mikoto’s strength shone through on a wholly different level.

“Take orders, check around the floor, wash dishes, or take out some trash during the lulls...”

“Yep, that’s right. Generally speaking, you’ll be fine if you just follow whatever Mama Mia tells you to do, but if you can react on the fly, then all the better. I heard you were a former princess, or former prostitute, or something, but you can really work.”

“I-I’m on a quest for enlightenment, so...!”

Haruhime, who had been pursuing a new career as a maid, was second only to Mikoto in getting things done around the tavern. Her tail was spinning as Runoa mentored her, and the renart did

everything she could to help out: taking and delivering orders, cleaning tables, washing dishes, taking out the trash, and even going out to buy ingredients at a moment's notice. The Benevolent Mistress was a high-pressure workplace that required all sorts of different jobs to be carried out, and every single one demanded speed.

Other than Ahnya and them, the employees were all constantly working in the kitchen. The work situation made Hestia want to scream. "How do you even manage with so few people on a normal day?!"

"Meow-ha-ha...This is my *Hestia Familia* scapegoat plan! If we don't have money to hire temp workers, then all we need to do is call in a favor!"

While Hestia and the others were running around, Chloe grinned evilly at the respite she had gained. It went without saying that this was the true goal all along.

"The crowds'll love the goddess and followers who look as good as we do, meow! And those bountiful bosoms! It's a win-win all around! Even Mama Mia can't complain! It's purrfect!"

"I feel bad for Hestia and the rest, though...But your plan is definitely working."

"Meeow! Not too shabby, Chloe!"

"Heh-heh-heh, praise mew more!"

Chloe, Runoa, and Ahnya had withdrawn to the kitchen for a moment as they watched *Hestia Familia* running around working. In truth, The Benevolent Mistress was getting much more business than the other taverns. Part of it was the word spreading that *Hestia Familia* themselves were working there, and part of it was what Chloe had alluded to earlier: the effect of gorgeous girls driving up interest. The dazzling Eastern beauties Mikoto and Haruhime working as waitresses drew the gaze of practically every customer in the tavern, both male and female. And the sight of Lilly desperately pumping her legs as she sped around the tavern was especially appreciated by the deities who wanted to pat her on the head and play with the adorable prum.

They were doing a wonderful job filling the hole that Syr had left. And because of that, Ahnya, Chloe, and Runoa were ready to set out for their real goal.

"Mama Mia's out of the kitchen! Meow's our chance!"

"Let's go, Lyu!"

"B-but..."

"Aren't you curious about Syr and white-hair? Besides, this is our only chance to enjoy the festival! It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to explore and eat, meow!"

Lyu was perturbed by the thought of them shirking work to spy on Syr and Bell's date. She found herself unable to move, feeling

uncharacteristically indecisive. But then—

“Are you really going to be okay with it if their relationship changes without you knowing it?” Chloe’s eyes narrowed and she dropped her usual teasing tone.

That caused Lyu to move...and she broke. She stayed silent as she placed her hand on her chest and just barely managed to nod.

“Then let’s go, meow!” Ahnya said as she led the charge out the back door. Lyu turned back, furrowed her brow apologetically vaguely in *Hestia Familia*’s direction, and then got dragged along by Chloe.



“I’m sorry for sending you that letter out of the blue like that...”

“When I read that you wanted to go on a date, it totally caught me by surprise.”

We chat as we walk around holding hands.

I can’t completely calm my nerves, but I do my best to keep it from showing and not act too awkward as we stroll through the festively decorated streets.

“I’m sorry, but I just really wanted to see the festival...That’s why...” Syr is right beside me, beaming at me like she wants her expression to convey how she really feels. “Thank you so much for coming.”

Her hair sways and a faint aroma tickles my nose. I’d be lying if I said my heart didn’t skip a beat.

After showing me such a cute smile...there’s no way I can tell her it’s all because Hedin blackmailed me. I manage to respond with an awkward smile. She squeezes my hand a little tighter, an embarrassed smile of her own still on her lips.

It’s strange to picture what we must look like, but the two of us blushing together like this must make us seem such a pure, innocent couple.

But the moment my imagination goes that far, I stop myself from thinking about it. After trying so hard not to lose my cool, it would all be wasted if I end up causing my own breakdown.

“We’re lucky the weather cleared up.”

“Yes, it really is. I never do this normally, but I actually prayed to the gods, asking for it to be nice out even if only for today.”

I narrowly hang on by making small talk as I guide us toward the sounds of the festival.

Heading southwest from Amour Square, we step out onto Main Street.

“Uwaah...!”

There are so many stalls and so many wooden crates filled with a

dizzying array of grains, fruits, and vegetables.

My breath catches as I take in a view of the city I've never experienced before.

The city's southern shopping district has never been lacking for excitement even in normal times, but it's also the part of town that has gotten into the festival spirit more than anywhere else. Centered around South Main Street, it's filled to the brim with people and the rich bounty of the harvest season.

"That's the Goddess Festival's famous attraction..."

The most eye-catching thing in the street is the string of wooden crates lined up like minecarts, each large enough to hold a bull. They are filled with mountains of golden wheat, colorful berries and apples, enormous pumpkins, and every other sort of crop imaginable. The overflowing wealth of the harvest is as alluring and magnificent as the contents of any treasure chest.

There are no salespeople standing by the crates, and I almost assume they're only there for display until I spot someone casually grab a piece of fruit and take a delicious-looking bite out of it while passing by. And no one says anything at all, or even gives him a second glance.

"I had heard a little bit about it, but...it really is fine to just take some."

"Yes. If you pay the fee to someone from either the Guild or *Ganesha Familia*, you're free to help yourself. See how everyone has the same badge? That's the sign that you've paid already."

Just like Syr said, apparently at Orario's Goddess Festival, once you cover a modest fee, it's okay to pick up any of the fruits and vegetables set along the streets and eat to your heart's content. To top it off, a lot of the nearby shops offered to prepare food as well. If you bring an ingredient that isn't really meant to be eaten raw, they'll cook it for you free of charge.

Looking around, I see children and adults alike enjoying themselves.

There are stoves set up for baking fresh, piping-hot bread, but also steaming potatoes and other buttered vegetables, too. Other places are slicing fruits and using them to top ice cream. An elven girl is dancing excitedly with an armful of wheat that she carries over to a shop where a kindly-looking prum woman takes it from her and gives her a bowlful of a milky porridge that had already been cooking in a big pot. It looks like it was sweetened, and the girl's eyes glimmer when she sees the berries and flower petals on top of the porridge she eats, savoring every bite.

Everywhere I look, I find another amazing sight. Even if it was a harvest festival, if I had done something like that back in the village

where I grew up, I would have been scolded and had the wrath of the gods called down on me. In fact, that's exactly what happened when Gramps did something wild and I got caught up in it, too.

I restrain myself so I don't stare in awe at everything little thing like a country bumpkin since I am on a date with right Syr now, but I can't help the fluttery feeling in my heart at the thought of getting to see such a colorful, exciting scene with her.

It's probably a scene that could only happen because we're in Orario, where the magic-stone industry is incredibly advanced.

"Since we're here and all, shall we try something?"

"Yes. It's a little early for lunch, though. That said, I didn't eat anything for breakfast."

"Really?...Actually, since I was busy getting ready for the date, I didn't eat anything, either."

"Hee-hee! That's why I didn't eat, too."

I am a little bashful seeing Syr giggle as she holds her hand over her mouth, but I quickly call out to the nearest member of the Guild. The badge costs one thousand valis. It is in the shape of a little shield and depicts wheat and Demeter—*Demeter Familia's* emblem—along with the word "South" in Koine. Seems like the foods on display at each Main Street are different, so if you were going to walk around and explore all of them, you would have to buy different badges at each street. I guess that's all a part of the Guild's event planning. Even with all this happening around the city, they are still keeping track of things.

Apparently, it is a common sight every year for people to try to sample every Main Street's displays and end up too full to move.

Incidentally, the badge is a magic-stone item and impossible to forge. Anyone who tries to pull any weird moves will immediately get arrested by the volunteers from *Ganesha Familia* keeping watch all around the city.

With Master's teachings and all, I try to pay for both of us myself, but Syr refuses to back down on this matter, so we end up splitting the cost. I tremble, hearing Master's voice in the back of my head saying, "*One point deducted*" as I take some wheat grains that look like nuggets of gold to one of the stalls with a stove. Handing them over to a stout old lady, she hands me back some bread that had just finished baking. I tear off a small piece and add some of the peanut butter she had suggested—

"D-delicious!"

"Mm-hmm, this is excellent!"

It is piping hot and just a little bit sweet. It feels like my cheeks are going to melt. Even though I rarely enjoy sweet things, I'm tempted to get seconds. I break into a smile as our eyes meet, and we

continue our stroll while quieting our stomachs' rumblings by snacking along the way.

"Say 'ahhh,' Bell."

"Eh?"

"Say 'ahhh' and I'll give you some."

All of a sudden, I see that Syr has torn off a bit of bread and is holding it out in front of me. There is a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

—It's come to this already!

I flinch a little internally at her sudden offensive. But it's okay. I already studied how to deal with this! Even after she collapsed once, Cassandra had rallied and kept going, trading dozens of bites with me until she started to run a fever. Her sacrifice will not be in vain!

I hold Syr's outstretched hand with my right and take a bite of the bread as if it were only natural.

"Eh?"

"Mmm, it really is good. Would you like some, too?"

"Huh?" Syr's wide-eyed, not understanding what's going on as I return the favor.

"Here, say 'ahhh,'" I say, flashing a perfect smile.

She is undeniably flustered seeing me still holding her hand.

"...A...ahhhh..."

And then she takes a bite. Her cute lips gently brush against my fingers through my glove. I maintain my smile as she keeps my hand pressed against her lips while she chews.

"How was it?"

"...It was delicious..."

I can see her cheeks flushing as she hides her face behind my hand. She refuses to meet my eyes as I say, "I'm glad you liked it!" before finishing off the last of the bread.

"...Huh? Wait, what?"

Syr cocks her head in confusion as I flash a teasing grin and then gently take the lead as we begin to walk again.

There are plenty of other things besides food being sold on South Main Street. Accessories of flowers and nuts, and protective charms associated with the festival go on as far as the eye can see. Not to mention the roadside stalls set up on cloaks laid out on sidewalks, offering all sorts of accessories. In one corner, there's even a lively puppet theater putting on a show with what must be a mage involved in the production, because the performance really seems to pack a punch. And farther down at the boundary between the street and Central Park is a gate done up to look like it's made from ears of wheat.

We're standing in the shopping district where there's a casino and

a theater and all sorts of other entertainment, but right now, no one is thinking about anything besides the festival.

But the crowds are really something because of that...

I normally don't visit this part of town too much, but I can still tell it's far more crowded than usual. Not so packed that you can't move around at all, of course. But there's definitely a lot of jostling when passing people, and the children running around can suddenly scamper by right in front of us, so it's important to stay on our toes.

...I probably shouldn't compare the two, but I guess this is still better than the Dungeon where monsters can attack you out of nowhere.

I maintain a natural pace as I shield Syr from the crowds as best I can, guiding her by our linked hands with a marginal amount of strength so as not to bother her, sometimes nudging her toward me and other times slightly shifting her away as needed. And of course, always protecting her from big, broad-shouldered people passing by, and constantly looking ahead while making sure to pick a path that doesn't involve any swerving or drastic course changes. When a horse-drawn cart comes, I let go of her hand for a moment and continue chatting as I guide us to the side of the road.

I'm Level 4. A full-fledged second-tier adventurer. Moving deftly in a crowded flow of people comes naturally—is what I'd like to say. But being able to maintain the proper positioning while escorting someone is the fruit of Master's teachings.

"If Lady Syr suffers even a single scratch, I will kill you."

His eyes had been deadly serious. A chill settled over me as I put my life on the line to master how to properly escort a lady. But because of that effort, I'm able to take care of Syr like this. I try not to draw attention to it, of course, but I think that she might be starting to notice.

"..."

Her blue-gray eyes are fixed on me as we walk.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Ah, no, it's not there's anything wrong, but..."

When I meet her gaze, she looks shocked in a way that isn't like her.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this...I'm supposed to be making your heart race, but for some reason it's *my* heart that won't settle down...urghhhhh, something's strange..."

She places a hand on her ever-so-slightly reddened cheek as she cocks her head.

Ummm...I guess I should interpret that as a sign she's enjoying the moment?

I am a bit stunned by her reaction—but my hand flashes out a moment later.

“Excuse me...but pickpocketing isn’t a good thing to be doing, if you ask me,” I warn the man.

“Eep?!”

Syr is shocked as I wrap an arm around her shoulder while catching the wrist of a man who was reaching out for her bag.

“There is a dramatic increase in pickpockets during festivals relative to normal times.” Another admonition from Master.

Also, Lilly is always harshly warning me, *“You are always so full of openings, so try to stay on your guard, please! If I were a thief, I would have robbed you at least forty times by now!”*

I guess Syr had been an easier target because she hadn’t been as focused on her surroundings.

I’m never really comfortable with these sorts of things. This pickpocket is surely just a normal person not associated with any familia, and he blanches in the face of the superior vision and speed of an upper-tier adventurer. Noticing the commotion immediately, two members of *Ganesha Familia* quickly take him away.

“U-umm...Bell...?”

Scratching my cheek as I watch them disappear into the crowd, a vanishingly soft voice brings me back to my senses. Syr looks embarrassed at the close contact. I immediately let go of her shoulder and turn to face her. She has a shy smile that almost seems reflexively awkward for dealing with something she isn’t used to.

“I’m sorry. Are you all right?”

Syr’s cheeks flare up again.



“Not bad, kiddo!”

Runoa was peeking out from behind a corner along with Chloe and Ahnya, watching Bell and Syr.

“It sort of feels like white-hair is kind of cooler than usual, meow!”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s like more than just his looks have changed.”

“When did he turn into such a lady-killer?! His hottie level is eight hundred, nine hundred, a thousand...! Meow?! It’s still rising?!”

Their little band was currently observing the date from a distance—Ahnya had tracked Syr’s scent after they broke out from The Benevolent Mistress. Well, it was more like they were just sort of doing whatever they wanted.

They were certainly not paying any heed to the odd looks they were getting. Ahnya had a crepe in one hand and a hot potato in the other as she chowed down on both.

“Meow! Look at that perfect positioning...!”

“What do you mean, Chloe?”

“He’s protecting her from the press of the crowd at all times, meow! What an insanely high-level technique...anyone other than me would miss it!”

Chloe was looking smug for some reason as she explained how Bell was even now naturally protecting Syr as they walked.

“He’s no little rookie meow, he’s a proper gentle-rookie!” Chloe declared.

““Ooohhhh!””

“...”

But Lyu was just silently watching Bell and Syr, a hand pressed against her chest.



We tried all sorts of food, chatted, and sat down on a bench for a quick break along the way. It was quite a lot of fun strolling through the festivities in the shopping district.

Somewhere along the way, it started to feel like she was staring at me, but when I glance over, she quickly smiles to hide it.

“Is there something else you want to try, Syr?”

“Hmmm...I should hold off for now. I ate a little too much already...”

“Maybe you had too many berries earlier, after all.”

“Grrrr!”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

Syr glares at me when I tease her, but her expression quickly reverts to a smile.

It’s hard to describe, but it feels nice. It’s a lot of fun even just exploring the stuff around us. And with a little time, it feels like my earlier awkward stiffness has faded some.

—Which I suppose means it’s time to shift into the real meat of the plan.

“Was there anything you wanted to do today, Syr?”

“Eh?”

“If there was anything in particular you wanted to do, then please let me know.”

Master’s first rule: The man should always be leading the woman. But he should also ask if there’s anything she has her heart set on. It’s important to strive for mutual understanding.

A date is an operation that comes together through the efforts of two people, but it can’t just be a job. It’s supposed to be an unselfish effort in order to enjoy a moment together with someone. That’s the whole point.

“Ummm...nothing in particular...”

“In that case, there is a place I kind of want to go. Would you mind accompanying me?”

Rule number two: To the greatest extent possible, put what you are thinking clearly into words. Hesitation is the enemy.

However, always remember that even if your partner doesn't seem to mind, you are always being tested. Never let your guard down.

Have confidence, be kind, and be brave.

“—You must consider everything related to the planning of the rendezvous by yourself. That alone is absolute,” Master had said.

If it wasn't a date I planned myself, it wouldn't mean anything.

“I will teach you the fundamentals you need, and I will beat the proper frame of mind into you, but that is all. When it comes to the event itself, I will say nothing.”

“Ehhh?! B-but...”

“Fool. Advice from others, books, divine revelations—they are all nothing more than suggestions. If you can't gather all the available resources and put together a way to make Lady Syr smile by yourself, then she will not truly be pleased because it won't contain any of your own character.”

“!”

“How much joy can a man and woman share together? At the end of the day, that is the essence of a date.”

Of all of Master's teachings, that one had the most impact on me.

At first, I had only been doing this to protect *Hestia Familia*, but then I realized I also want to make Syr happy. I want to repay her. That's something real, too.

The way she always makes lunch for me. How she always greets me at the tavern. And when I was battered by the distance that had opened up between me and a certain someone so very far beyond my reach, she had been the one who told me I didn't have to go on adventures. And during the War Game, she had given me a protective charm. And during the incident with the Xenos, when my body had become unbearably cold, it was she who wrapped me in gentle warmth.

I remember it all. She's given me so much. I want to repay that however I can. That's why, even though I've never gone on a date before, I'm giving this my all.

Syr breaks into a smile.

“...Okay, then let's go see the place you wanted to see!”

I smile back happily, my cheeks reddening slightly.

“It's a bit of a long walk, so let's take a coach.”

We head to a road where cabs often pass. I hold out my hand to hail a ride—not one of the cheap plain carriages or covered wagons

that are common around Orario, but a cab with a magic-stone stabilizer. When taking a normal carriage, there are usually noticeable shocks and jolts, but the stabilizer serves as a shock absorber, so it's less rough on your bottom. Naturally, that's also something Master taught me. He had even threatened me if I made Syr ride in any carriage that wasn't at least this quality.

If I were alone, I would have just run there, but with Syr, a carriage is the right tool for the job. Higher-grade cabs cost more, but this isn't the time to be scrimping. And I had amassed a large war chest while undergoing Master's training.

The carriage that we climb into is an odd model where the driver sits in a higher position in the back, but with a crack of the whip, we're off. It's on the smaller side and compact enough to have a little turn radius, but the fluffy seats are just the right size to accommodate two people. The decorations on it are luxurious, and it might just be my self-consciousness, but it feels like we're drawing attention from the people on the street. Then again, it might just be the beautiful girl sitting next to me who's catching everyone's eyes.

When we pass through the southwest district, the stabilizer cannot totally suppress the bumps, and when the carriage sways and our shoulders bump together, Syr and I blush a little and smile at each other.

"If I may?" I step out first and hold out my hand for her.

"Thank you very much."

Stepping down from the carriage, we have reached our destination at East Main Street.

It pales in comparison to the shopping district, but it is still amazingly lively. Something seems to be going on at the amphitheater where Monsterphilia had been held, because I can hear roaring cheers coming from that direction.

Holding hands, I guide us away from East Main Street and into the alleys. Even the narrow side streets are brilliantly decorated and lined with beautiful flowers.

"Hmm? This is..." Syr looks around, as if noticing something.

Not long after, we reach the end of the alley.

"Ah! It's Big Brother!"

"And Big Sister!"

Lots of smiling children are waiting there.

"Lai? And Fina?"

"Waaaah! You look so cute, Big Sis!"

"What's with you, Bro? You look so stuck-up!"

"What a smooth guy..."

"Ah-ha-ha...!"

Syr is surprised as Fina, Lai, and Ruu all rush over.

The children from the orphanage are excited to see us.

“Well, if it isn’t Bell. To think you’d really stop by to visit.”

“Hello, Maria.”

The head of the orphanage, Mother Maria, welcomes us.

We’re just inside Daedalus Street.

Straight down the big stairs at the entrance, the residents of the slum have set out their own stalls—though it might be more accurate to call it a flea market with a festival twist. Lai and the other children from the orphanage have their own little stall open, too.

“What sort of shop have you all made?”

“Ummm, we have ale!” Fina bursts out with a smile.

There are several barrels lined up beside her as she laughs cheerfully. And when she turns the tap, what comes out is indeed ale.

“A nice older dwarf said ale is the best for making money during a festival! And we helped him brew it!” Lai says, puffing his chest out proudly.

Behind him, a red-faced dwarf who must have been that friend of theirs grins and gives a thumbs-up. Well, it’s true enough that alcohol goes well with festivals, and there are plenty of people who have secretly had some even at a young age...but I hope the kids didn’t drink any...

They look excited as they ask me if I want some, but I smile awkwardly as I gently turn down their offer. I shouldn’t be having any alcohol during my date with Syr, and I have a feeling I might get blasted by Master’s magic if I did...

After that, the children drag us along to continue the tour.

Fina takes Syr’s hand, and Lai pushes my back while Ruu clings to my arm like a fawning little brother (sister?). The other children are all running around, not giving us a moment’s pause as they point out one thing after another for us to see.

“Wheat cookies!

“We borrowed a stove to cook them!”

“Try one! Try one!”

They have other things on sale besides just ale, namely some nicely browned cookies that are slightly misshapen and fried vegetables that came straight from the orphanage’s field. Part of the reason I make a point of buying some is because they had made the food themselves, but it’s also because they just seem plain delicious. Maria watches over us kindly as we play around, just like the first time we came to visit.

During the incident with the Xenos, I had hurt them all. There was a time when they rejected me. But that only makes it that much more amazing to be able to laugh and smile together with them again like this.

“Let’s dance, Big Sis!”

“...That sounds like a wonderful idea!”

Perhaps the ale all the slum’s residents had been savoring was starting to take effect, but everyone seems to be sporting rosy cheeks as they pull out old, beaten up musical instruments. The music they’re playing on a whim doesn’t exactly mesh together perfectly, but it’s still a pleasant melody, and a bunch of girls invite Syr to dance in the street.

This is a Daedalus Street-style folk dance. First they form a circle, and then they dance like they did for the nursery rhyme the first time I visited.

Syr has a gentle smile on her face. I suppose you could call that parental love. She’s holding hands with the children and kicking her legs in time with the beat, and when an Amazon girl grabs onto her from behind, she pretends to be mad while wrapping the girl up in her arms and nuzzling their faces together.

My smile reaches my eyes as I watch her laughing and having fun from a short distance away. I’ve seen it once before. This is a side of Syr that I still don’t really know. This isn’t the same girl who works at the tavern. It’s an innocent figure, one that I had wanted to see again.

“Big Brother!” Fina cheerfully clings onto me.

“Not now, Fina. Bell is taking a break,” Maria scolds her gently while giving me a wooden mug of freshly squeezed fruit juice.

I say my thanks as I accept the drink...

“Thank you very much for stopping by. But is this really okay? The two of you were enjoying the festival together...”

“That’s not it at all, Maria. I thought about a lot of different things, but...the reason we came here is because I thought that Syr would be able to enjoy herself here with them.”

That is how I really felt. And hearing that, Maria’s concern is replaced by a gentle, motherly smile. She says, “Thank you so much,” and I manage to answer with, “I should thank you as well.” A slightly more adult reply than usual.

“Big Bro, you’re so cool today!” Fina suddenly looks up from rubbing her cheek against my stomach as she wags her cream-colored tail. I can’t help blushing a little bit after getting such a direct compliment.

“And Big Sis is wearing supercute underwear today! When I hugged her before, I could tell even through her clothes! I’m sure they’re her special-date underwear!”

Is this girl a budding underwear designer?

“Big Bro! Where are you going to spend the night with Big Sis?” Fina eyes are sparkling.

“What are you talking about?!” I accidentally raise my voice a bit

at her sudden question.

Does she know what she's saying, or...?

"I mean, today is the harvest festival, right? Mother Maria said that today is the day of the year when the most couples are blessed with children!"

My face twitches and I turn beet red. A split second later, fast enough to shock even an adventurer, Maria covers the innocent little girl's mouth and exclaims, "Fina?!"

Fina only manages to get out a muffled "Mgh?!" as Maria blushes and tries to laugh it off. All I can do is force myself to laugh, too. The sudden awkwardness is almost too much to bear.

There is no way that would happen, but even imagining it...I can't totally clear the redness from my cheeks as I glance over toward Syr.

"Argh!"

A prum boy in the circle dancing falls over. It's a big fall, too. His arm is red from a big scrape.

"Ossian!" Lai shouts.

The pleasant music stops.

Tears well up in his eyes faster than they can fall from his cute, round eyes. And before Maria or I can run over, Syr wraps him in a hug.

"Are you okay, Ossian?"

"B-Big Sis...!"

"It hurts, doesn't it? Go ahead and cry. It's okay, Big Sister knows a spell to make you smile again."

She kneels down, hugging Ossian. She doesn't pay any heed to her clothes getting dirty as she gently holds him close. Ossian desperately tries to muffle his tears as he cries into her chest. Her pale, white hands caress his back, occasionally patting it, like rocking an infant.

"Let the tears out. Let the tears out.

Because you aren't really there.

In a garden of flowers, red tears, and blossoming gold.

May the light we still can't see guide us.

Let's smile together. Yes, let's smile together.

Because I'm sure we'll meet again someday."

She began spinning a magic spell almost like a lullaby. No one can move. Everyone's eyes are transfixed. She almost looks like a goddess tenderly comforting a child. Her beautiful voice fills the silent corner of the Labyrinth District.

"...I'm okay now. I won't cry anymore..."

"Really? That's wonderful! Then how about a big grin instead?"

Encouraged by Syr's beaming face, Ossian manages to crack a

smile, too. Soon, everyone watching the heartwarming scene has one, and new cheers start going up. Lost in the moment, my own lips slip into a smile as Maria and I walk over to them.

We clean Ossian's scrape and bandage it up.

"Thank you, Mom, Big Brother!" He grins, back to his usual cheer.

It was almost like Syr really had cast a spell on him.

"Will you join me, Bell?"

"Eh?"

"The continuation of the dance. Everyone hasn't had their fill yet."

Syr stands up as she looks around at everyone.

Lai, Fina, Ruu, Ossian, all of the children burst into laughs and cheers. It's a new beginning. I had long since broken into a smile myself.

"May I...may we have this dance?"

"Gladly!" I respond, taking her hand.

Holding hands, we begin to dance: an improvised waltz with Syr and me in the center. There's no need for etiquette. It's enough that it's fun.

The children all join hands and begin twirling around us. And then some children start playing ocarinas, looking like they're having the time of their lives. Unwilling to be outdone, the adults pull out what seems like an ordinary barrel and began drumming out their own rhythm. Claps and stamps. A small, nameless band fills Daedalus Street with music and dance.

Hearing the cheerful melody, more and more guests start to show up. Fina and Ruu take them by the hand and bring them into the dance circle.

The music never ends, and the smiles never stop. For a short while, everyone forgets that Daedalus Street is a slum and simply enjoys themselves.

"*Haah...*Now *that* was a dance."

Syr sighs in a comfortable sort of exhaustion as she rests on a brick bench.

We are taking a breather while watching the children and the other revelers continue dancing. Opportunities like this are probably rare in this neighborhood. Lots of people are gathering around the stalls as Daedalus Street enjoys its boom. Whether she had intended it or not, the kindness Syr showed the children is what made this moment possible.

"That song before was beautiful. What sort of spell was that?"

Maria had gotten busy, so I hand Syr a cup of fresh juice in her stead. She thanks me and answers my question.

"It was improvised. I just made it up on the spot," she responds,

sticking her tongue out.

“Eh? Really?”

“Yes. I just wanted Ossian and everyone to smile.”

I sit down next to her in surprise before noticing what had happened to her clothes.

Her pretty clothes had become totally filthy while she was getting Ossian to stop crying. The damp spots from his tears are one thing, but dirt and very noticeable crimson blood have stained her jacket.

Maybe noticing my gaze, Syr's eyebrows arch.

“I got a little bit dirty, but aren't I just as cute this way? It's like a whole new look!”

Someone who didn't know what had happened would be hard-pressed to say that it looked cute, even as flattery. But even so, she's still smiling. She doesn't seem to find it unpleasant at all. As if it doesn't bother her in the least. If anything, she looks positively sunny and cheerful.

Something about it just makes me feel so very warm and fuzzy. I wouldn't ever dare, but it almost makes me want to wrap my arms around her and give her a big hug. And it makes me wonder if that smile is what I had always been hoping to see.

“Did you know that they were opening a shop here, Bell?”

“Yes. Maria told me. You were planning to come by, too, weren't you?”

“Yes...I was thinking I might come by myself on another day,” Syr murmurs. “I guess you saw through me,” she adds as she watches the people walking through Daedalus Street with a deep interest.

“A lot has happened...but I was thinking it would be nice to play here together with you and the children again.”

Daedalus Street has been almost entirely restored. The children had been living in temporary housing, but they were finally able to go back to their old lives. I had wanted to pay them a visit with Syr to celebrate their return. It would be like coming back to a memory that was just our own.

Her eyes narrow.

“I'm glad,” she says pensively. “I'm so very glad...This has been a lovely date.”

A beautiful smile crosses her lips as she looks at me.

There is no way I wouldn't be totally drawn into that. But there is something else pressing at my heart as I break into a natural smile.

“...? What is it?”

“Nothing...I'm just glad, too.”

I am pretty sure that my lips are twisted into a big smile like the children's. I fully understand it's a bit childish, but I can't help being honest about it.

“Who knew it would feel so nice to know you enjoyed my date plan?”

I flash a broad grin as I put the feelings blooming in my heart into words.

Seeing that, Syr freezes. It looks like her face has gone red, too. It seems almost miraculous, but I quickly stand up and regroup.

“Syr, let’s get you some new clothes!”

“Bell?”

“I still have a bunch more places I’d like to see with you.”

I take her hand as she looks surprised and give her a gentle tug.

Syr seems flustered as I shout good-bye to the children and Maria while leading her away. They wave and cheerfully shout, “See you later!”

I really am starting to enjoy myself.

I want to pay Syr back even more! I want her to enjoy everything to her heart’s content!



“That is sufficient. When it comes to dealing with her, defense is a fool’s errand.”

The white-haired boy led the girl with blue-gray hair away by the hand as Hedin observed from above.

He was keeping watch from atop a temple at the corner of the neighborhood, his vantage point rising just a little bit higher than the surrounding buildings.

The voices of people enjoying the festival could be heard in the distance below him.

“If you let her seize the initiative, you’ll never get a chance to make your move. In which case, the only choice is to press the attack. Lead her around with unpredictable situations. The only way to make this day special is to maintain the lead throughout. If you get the wrong idea and attempt to make any sort of lewd move, though, you will die then and there.”

Currently, *Freya Familia*’s members were spread out in a wide area centered around Syr.

Under the plan “Flover Guardian” (named so by Hegni), they were observing the couple from atop roofs, behind buildings, and mixed among the crowds like private guards, all in the name of protecting the girl. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that they were surrounding Syr and Bell.

If Syr were ever in any danger, they would immediately become either shields to protect her or swords to cut down any who might cause her harm.

And because of that, if Bell even attempted to take her to a suspicious location, he would immediately be annihilated. The unfortunate rabbit did not know the thin ice he was skating across as he went about the date with his life on the line—though he had noticed the countless glares piercing him as a cold sweat formed in his heart.

“Though worrying about a late bloomer like you losing your mind is just a waste of time.”

Ordinarily, *this much* force was not used for Syr’s protection. At most, there were usually just one or two first-tier adventurers watching from the shadows. The reason such a large number of even second-tier adventurers had been deployed was because it was the Goddess Festival and most of all because Syr had brought Bell along out of a clear affection for him.

Put simply, the members of the familia were jealous. That was just how important the girl Syr Flover was to *Freya Familia*.

“Passing marks thus far...”

Meanwhile, Hedin was being run around on lookout for a different reason. Guarding Syr was the pretext, but his real goal was to supervise the date rather than observe it. He was watching as Bell, whom he had completely reprogrammed, escorted Syr.

On one level, it was for the sake of fulfilling Syr’s wish. If Bell did something irredeemably foolish, Hedin fully intended to unleash one or two relatively serious spells. True to his alias Hildsleif, he would surely be able to use his precise magic control that was said to be the best in the city and erase the boy from Syr’s field of view with a precise lightning strike. And after that, he would severely punish the boy to break him down even further.

His aptitude for retaining lessons is terrible, and he’s unbearably inefficient, but...as expected, he isn’t betraying expectations thus far...

Thinking back on the five days of training, Hedin had adjusted his view of Bell Cranell.

He had caught the attention of the goddess whom Hedin loved and respected by growing at a blinding rate. He was undoubtedly an unbearable eyesore, but he had shown his worth during the training he had endured for this day.

Hedin despised incompetents. Those who continued to live aimless lives were nothing more than slaves to pathetic pride and self-respect. Precisely because he was an elf with a longer lifespan, he refused to tolerate the sloth of other races who could not live so long. He also found other elves absorbed in their own pompous arrogance completely unbearable. Every day he found himself thinking that those worthless incompetents should actually start living their lives.

And at the same time, Hedin highly valued competence. And part

and parcel with that, he also reserved a base level of appreciation for those who strove to better themselves without sparing any effort.

In that regard, Bell Cranell passed. He had quite literally put his life on the line to live. From how he defeated the minotaur as a Level 1 adventurer to the way he persevered through the clashes with Apollo and Ishtar, and the way he handled himself during the Xenos incident or his rumored actions in the deep levels—he had tackled all those things with a deep resolve. He had overcome adventures that an average person could not begin to imagine, and was still desperately trying to catch up to the first-tier adventurers.

If he died somewhere along the way and passed from everyone's memories, Hedin at least would remember and value that earnestness. Though only those who did not die along the way were capable of being called first-tier adventurers—

Still, he had done enough to be acknowledged by Hedin.

Even now, with the unusual situation surrounding the date, Bell had been forced to accept irrational requirements, and yet he had not run away from the ridiculous challenge. Whatever the motive, he was attempting to break free from his incompetence. That fact at least was something that Hedin could respect.

By no means had Hedin become attached to him, but he did hold certain expectations for the boy.

“...Will you manage to get her to realize that which she desires?”

His murmur was swept up in the breeze without reaching anyone's ears.

A person approached him from behind.

“What are you muttering about, freak?”

“...Even I dwell on my emotions from time to time. Eavesdropping is a vulgar practice, and you should restrain yourself, imbecile.”

“You were the one muttering to yourself over there, asshole. Don't go blaming me for your own stupidity.”

It was Allen.

Many would've found it hard to believe they were in the same familia given how hostile they were, not even willing to look each other in the eye as they spoke.

Allen stopped right next to Hedin, holding his silver spear as he looked down on Bell and Syr.

“The others are starting to get their hackles up. You're the one in charge here, so quit bein' lazy and do something about it.”

His comment was rough enough that it almost sounded like he was trying to pick a fight, but Hedin merely sighed.

In terms of position, Allen was the second-in-command of the familia. He hated the role himself, but he had been assigned it after Hedin had turned it down. Though that was years ago at this point.

Hedin nodded silently, acknowledging his misstep, and then, suddenly curious, he glanced over at Allen.

“Where do you fall?”

Do you hate Bell when Syr looks at him like that? he asked silently with his eyes.

“Don’t ask shit you already know the answer to,” the cat person muttered in annoyance. “My loyalty is to the goddess.”

As if declaring they were done talking, Allen silently leaped away. Unnoticed by anyone else, he continued following after the couple.

Hedin watched in silence as he disappeared from view before changing locations himself in order to give new orders.



Leaving Daedalus Street, the first thing we do is get some clean clothes for Syr.

“It looks really cute on you, Syr!”

It’s a nice little bolero jacket similar to her first one. Her dress is still the same, since it had not gotten particularly dirty. I’m wearing a satisfied smile after successfully demonstrating a man’s resourcefulness by paying for the new jacket.

“Th-thank you very much...” Syr says, turning red.

“You have some petals in your hair!”

I reach my hand out toward her head as we walk along. Petal showers are pouring down from buildings left and right for the festival. I comb out a peach-colored petal that had gotten caught in her hair.

“S-sorry...” She turns red again, her eyes flitting around nervously.

Sensing her gaze going toward my right hand, I shift positions slightly.

“Shall we hold hands, Syr?”

I flash an apologetic smile for forgetting to hold her hand.

“Uuuurgh...” Syr turns red yet again and makes a noise that sounds almost like a puppy growling cutely.

What...?

And then, right around when we reach East Main Street, she explodes.

“Something’s off! Something’s definitely off about you!”

She shouts as we walk down the middle of the street, startling not just me but everyone around us, too.

“There’s no way Bell, the meekest rabbit boy ever, could suddenly be able to say I look beautiful or cute or stuff like that so smoothly!”

“I—I mean, I’m just being me...”

“Taking a break for me before I even start to notice that I’m feeling a little tired! And noticing that I want to hold hands! There’s no way! The childlike Bell who only ever has dungeons, dungeons, dungeons on his mind! Who can’t even begin to understand a maiden’s heart! That Bell would never, ever be able to do that!”

“Y-you don’t have to go that far...”

Hearing how Syr really sees me is starting to eat away at my heart.

“Would you rather I not?” I ask nervously.

“No, I’m happy! I’m really happy! But this isn’t how it was supposed to be!”

She seems to be having trouble controlling the redness in her cheeks as she vents at me. She looks like she might start stamping her foot at any moment. It’s so out of place and childlike and cute.

“I was planning to be the one to hold your hand and tease you while you blushed like always! And all sorts of other things...!”

Ahhhh, I can definitely see it...

If it weren’t for Master’s training, I would just be getting led around by the nose at this point. I can’t say whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but she doesn’t seem to be entirely pleased with how things are turning out.

I start to get a little worried when I suddenly notice a nearby stall selling grapes on a skewer coated in a glistening layer of sugar.

“Hmm...? Oh, they’re selling candied grapes.”

They look like cute little jewels, so I quickly buy one.

“Would you like one, too, Syr?”

Her eyebrows shoot up angrily when I take one of the grapes off the wooden skewer and get ready to offer it to her.

“There! You just did it again! You were going to tell me to say ‘ahhh’ again, weren’t you!”

“No, I wasn’t planning to do that quite so often...! I was just going to hand it to you!”

I recoil a little as she starts growling like a puppy again. Overwhelmed by her intensity, a troubled smile flits across my face.

“So do you not want one?”

Faced with that, she turns undeniably red and looks away as she murmurs:

“...No, I want one...”

Her faint voice blends into the bustle of the crowd.

I start to hand her the grape, but she’s staring at it like a capricious kitten, so I give up and bring it straight to her lips.

She takes a small bite.

The surface of the candied grape crackles and there is a refreshing *squish* as she bites into the grape itself. Judging from her reddened face, it is more bittersweet than anything she has ever eaten before.

“—Gah?!” Chloe was suffering.

““Chloe?!””

Persevering in their pursuit of the couple, their little band was taking cover in the shade of an alley. Ahnya and Runoa both cried out when the black cat suddenly suffered a knockdown.

“I can’t take it anymore...When you think about it, why do we have to watch their lovey-dovey flirting, meow...? This is my epitaph:

A side of Syr that never

Did I wish to see.

Fading autumn of mine life.

“...gh!”

“Didn’t we decide we were going to watch over their date?! Live, Chloe! Come back!”

“Chloe! Don’t die on us, meow!”

A wave of bittersweetness crashed into the single girls, sapping their will to carry on. As the three of them made a dramatic fuss, heedless of the trouble they were causing for those around them, Lyu was...

“S-Syr...so bold...to think y-you were already that far along...!”

She was covering her bright red face with her hands and peeking out between her fingers at the two of them in the distance.

While what they were doing was merely in the range of “more than friends” but not quite at the level of lovers, it was too provocative for the naive, prim, and proper elf. She also couldn’t look away as she murmured in embarrassed shock.

The four of them were hanging on Syr’s and Bell’s every move.

Meanwhile...

““““Tch!”””””

Freya Familia’s adventurers charged with protecting Syr were all seething at Bell.

Elsewhere...

“““““Die in a fire, rabbit boy!”””””

The rougher adventurers in the crowd nearby, their glares filled with bloodlust and envy, were glaring daggers at Rabbit Foot as he attended to his beautiful companion.

...I-it sort of feels like over a hundred people are watching us...

And keenly attuned to gazes directed at him, Bell quietly broke into a sweat as he sensed the increasing sets of eyes and growing animosity every time Syr blushed.

Their harvest date was still far from over.



MONOLOGUE III



Something is weird.

That was what I thought.

I never would have imagined it would turn out like this. I want to scream.

—And more importantly, how did it end up like this?!

—Isn't it weird?! Seriously! Isn't this strange?!

—When did he turn into such a gentleman?!

But really, isn't something off?! For someone who was always blushing and shy around women, why is he being such a perfect escort on today of all days?!

This has to be some kind of trick! Don't be fooled! Don't fall for it!

And as I silently pray that, I start to become disgusted with myself as I feel myself starting to crack.

Even though there is something I absolutely have to do, even though I still want to fulfill my wish, I am pitiful, on the verge of becoming entrapped in the emotions washing over me. As if I would ever want to forget everything and stay like this forever.

Argh, my body feels hot. Nooo, my cheeks are, too.

I desperately keep a calm face so that the other people watching me won't notice, but I have no clue how well that's actually working. A few younger women all dressed up for the festival just said, "Her face is getting red!" "Is it a cold, I wonder?" "That must be rough!"

You've got it wrong! You've! Got! It! Wrong! So please just stop looking at me!...I can't take this...

The emotions rocking my heart are making me unstable. And that awful boy is still smiling. I was so desperately trying not to focus on that, so why has it come to this? What transformed him?

I frantically try to figure out what happened. My plan hadn't accounted for an irregularity like this.

Should I try to ask someone for help?

In truth, I have more allies than just Ottar.

The elf Hedin, who is somewhat more reliable than Allen and the other fanatics—though only Allen is more dangerous than him once he's truly angered.

As insightful as he is, he would make a dependable ally if he was willing to help me, so I made contact with him beforehand. Ottar could not make a move, but if I could somehow make contact with Hedin and explain—wait...

...Hedin?

...That incredibly intelligent and meddlesome Hedin...?

It couldn't be...

Th-there's no way...

—Anyway, calm down.

It's almost lunchtime.

Quieting my agitation, I struggle to regain my usual composure.

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CHAPTER 4
FULL PRINCESS PANIC!



CHAPTER 4

FULL PRINCESS PANIC!

The sun is reaching its peak in the sky.

A lot has happened, but I safely completed the first half of the plan.

Syr made a lunch for us, and we're sitting on a small bench away from the flow of people, resting in the shade of a tree as the leaves rustle in the breeze.

It's a light meal, probably out of consideration for the fact that we're going to end up eating more snacks while walking around the festival. But even so, it's clear she had gone all out. The meat and fried egg have a new, never-before-made seasoning, and I use every bit of the iron determination Master poured into me to say, "It's delicious!" with a beaming smile, which causes Syr to sulk a bit. I guess she can tell I forced myself to say that.

I immediately apologize, but then she starts giggling.

"Why does my cooking always end up coming out so oddly?"

"So you knew..."

"Of course. Even though you always try to hide it when I ask."

"Erk."

"I really do rack my brain to come up with ideas, though."

When we finish, Syr picks up her now-almost-empty handbag and we start walking together.

At this point, I've gotten over my reluctance at holding hands for the most part. It's still really embarrassing to look her in the eye, but the warmth I can feel in my hand is almost reassuring. I guess it's sort of like my heart is at ease?

Anyway, we keep going until we reach Central Park.

The largest open space in the city is filled with more people than I have ever seen in one spot before.

"There are the altars...The Towers of Plenty."

These four structures that had been erected for the festival have swarms of visitors—or rather worshippers—gathering around each one.

Demeter and the other goddesses are atop them.

"The goddesses of the harvest stand on the altars, right?"

“That’s right. As the symbols of the festival, they receive offerings and are worshipped by the people.”

A huge mass keeps crowding around the stone towers.

Each of them is waiting their turn to place a flower at the base of the closest altar and offer up their thanks to the goddess above.

Ah, so this is what genuine worship looks like.

Respectfully offering their thanks to the deities who embody the harvest season. This is the original purpose of traditional harvest festivals of yore.

“The Goddess Festival lasts for three days, and there are so many people who come at one point or another, so the goddesses sit up on those altars for them.”

“Whoa, the whole time...?”

Apparently, they alternate and take turns, so it isn’t like they are all present for the entire duration of the festival, but for the first day at least, all four of them are up on the altars.

I guess that just goes to show how many people gather to honor the goddesses. Demeter is simply standing there smiling as she waves to the people, drawing cheers from travelers and residents of the city alike, but some of the other goddesses are already looking groggy. Just hanging limply over the handrail like laundry set out to dry.

Still, the cheers coming from the worshippers haven’t died down at all. It’s amazing. If anything, the crowds seem to be enjoying the familiar scene, like this happens every year...

“Apparently, this year is a bit of an improvement.”

“Eh? How so?”

“The truth is, there were five towers last year...but Ishtar returned to the heavens before this year’s festival.”

“Ah.”

“Ishtar was a free-spirited and beautiful goddess, and it was customary for her to declare that she was bored and abandon the altar, which always caused a fuss...Also, she held a grudge against a certain goddess, so there were all sorts of incidents because of that...”

Ishtar was a goddess of bounty in addition to being a goddess of love.

All of a sudden, I feel a little awkward, since I had been deeply involved in the incident that spelled the end of *Ishtar Familia*. I can’t honestly pretend it had nothing to do with me.

But I quickly realize which goddess she must have held a grudge against. The northern tower where Freya is has just as many worshippers as Demeter’s tower to the west. Maybe even more.

“Lady Freyaaaaa!”

“Thank you for this year’s bounty!”

“Please grant thy divine blessing, Goddess!”

“Lady Freyaaaa! It’s me! Please marry meeee!”

Even on the far eastern edge of the park, we can still hear the shouts coming from around her tower.

As a true goddess of beauty, her popularity is unbelievable. The tendency to never appear in public combined with her reputation as the living incarnation of beauty have drawn a great many who are willing to endure the press of the crowd simply to lay eyes on her. I can even see some male gods making a fuss...Ah, there goes one. He’s getting dragged away by some people who look like members of the Guild plus his familia.

...I wonder if it gets boring being up there...?

The silver-haired goddess is gazing out across the crowd without really looking at anything in particular as she sits still on a stage the size of a small balcony. Her boaz attendant stands at her side as she stays seated in a chair that resembles a throne. She’s casually resting her elbow on the armrest and propping her head up.

Even for a goddess, being stuck in Central Park all day like that is probably not all that fun...

“—Ngh.”

Without any warning at all, her silver eyes that had been listlessly scanning the crowd suddenly focus on us.

This isn’t a passing coincidence. She very precisely spotted us in this enormous crowd.

—“I love you.”

I remembered the day *Ishtar Familia* was destroyed.

As the pillar of light pierced the heavens, the goddess who had sent Ishtar back had smiled at me. And from a far-off place, she had whispered a confession.

That event engraved the silver-haired goddess’s existence deep inside me. But her expression now is totally different from back then.

Where there had once been what I might even dare to call yearning in her eyes, now there’s only indifference...or maybe even a cold lack of interest?

Her silver eyes are looking at me—at us—like she’s seen something unpleasant.

“...Let’s go, Bell.”

Syr tugs my hand. I realize I had stopped moving.

Weaving our way through the crowd, I catch a glimpse of the tower one more time. The goddess is still staring at us.

“Would you please not look at other women when you’re with me? And if you say you were entranced by a goddess’s beauty, people will think you’re being blasphemous,” Syr says with a little pout once we leave Central Park.

“I—I wasn’t entranced...!”

I frantically try to explain myself, but she just breaks into a playful smile.

“On today of all days, displeasing a goddesses of the harvest just might bring you some terrible misfortune, you know?”



“I’m dying! I really might not make it...!”

Hestia had reached the pinnacle of exhaustion.

Her blue eyes were spinning from the unending series of labors.

Taking orders, running back and forth, carrying orders to tables, dealing with customers, washing dishes, taking out the trash—all the intense work that had been forced on her had long since surpassed her ability to cope.

“Bell was weirdly tired when he came home late last night, and then he left this morning after dolling himself up, so I was planning to track him to see what’s up, but then all this happened...What even is a Goddess Festival?! *I’m* a goddess, aren’t I? Where’s my sympathy?!”

She was washing dishes in the kitchen while Mikoto and Haruhime and Welf were all busy working the front.

Crack!

“You stupid goddess!!! How many plates do ya gotta break before you’re satisfied?!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek?! I’m sorry, boss!”

It was almost a reflex at this point for Hestia to immediately grovel whenever Mia raised a furious shout.

“We wouldn’t need deities if an apology could take care of everything!”

Hestia looked even more haggard as that thunderous shout promptly ended the discussion.

Lilly grabbed the collar of Hestia’s dress and whispered:

“Lady Hestia! Just leave this to us and run away!”

“Eh?! A-are you sure, supporter girl?”

“Your being here is just making more work for the rest of us! It’d be better if you weren’t here!”

“O-okay.”

“In exchange, please follow after Mr. Bell! It pains Lilly to have to rely on you for this, but it needs to be done!”

Hestia was overwhelmed by the force of Lilly’s bloodshot eyes as she murmured her thanks.

The goddess waited for Mia to look away and then escaped through the back door—or rather, Mia noticed but came to the same conclusion that Lilly had and simply let her go.

“I’m sorry, supporter girl! I’m sorry, everyone! I won’t let your

sacrifice be in vain!"

I'm coming, Beeeeeeeeeell!

Her black hair streamed behind her as she ran aimlessly through the streets, still wearing the tavern's uniform.

"Ahhh." Hermes breathed in the festival atmosphere with a contented nod. "If it isn't perfect weather for the Goddess Festival. All of the work that had been piling up is mostly squared away to boot, so maybe I should go have some fun with some beauties!"

While many people were cheerfully milling around the streets, his eyes were quickly drawn to the attractive women wearing colorful outfits for the event.

"Shall I slip a knife into your back before someone else does, Lord Hermes?"

Of course, the subzero gaze stabbing into him from behind was not so accommodating.

"I-I'm just joking, Asfi. Please, I'm begging you, don't take out your knife!" Hermes apologized to his aqua-haired follower. "I've had you running around till just yesterday, so today is a day off for you! I didn't forget!"

"Indeed. I've been taking care of a great many things in a great many places. It's been so long since my last real break that I can't even really remember when it was."

"E-exactly! There were a lot of things that wouldn't have been possible without you! That's Perseus for you! So please stretch your wings and relax today!"

Hermes frantically tried to patch things up as he kept rambling.

Asfi's reproachful gaze was unmoved. The deep bags under her eyes visible behind her glasses spoke to the heavy burden she had endured on a daily basis.

"...Well, given the circumstances, perhaps I should give you the proper princess treatment you deserve."

As easygoing as he was, Hermes did feel guilty for how much work he had dumped on Asfi's lap because of her incredible versatility.

"Shall we enjoy an intimate little date and take in the sights of the harvest feast like a loving couple?"

"Please stop, you're making me sick. In my current state, I might end up pummeling you if I have to listen to much more of that."

"I-it was that bad...?"

"I'm sure you could already tell without needing me to elaborate. Especially lately when it's been just one uproar after another."

Asfi sighed and then smiled ever so slightly for the first time that day.

“Being pampered would just be tiresome, but I wouldn’t mind walking around the city with you.”

“Ho-ho! That’s rather admirable. A simple request, if you ask me.”

“Wandering wherever I please under the sun while joyous scenes pass around me...that’s enough to cleanse my body and mind.”

“I feel like I got a glimpse into the true darkness of your heart there...”

“And whose fault do you think that is?”

They meandered along the winding city streets, enjoying themselves like companions who had been together for a long time.

They tossed some coins to a bard and traveling performers who were putting on a street show as Hermes naturally handed Asfi some apple wine and ice cream. This was enough to improve her mood a bit, as angry as she had been earlier. And for the first time in a while, a sincere, unadorned smile crossed Hermes’s face.

“Hmm? Is that...Bell?”

As they continued their peaceful stroll, just like Asfi had requested, Hermes noticed a certain someone.

He had not immediately recognized the boy who was leading around a young girl because his clothes and appearance were so drastically different.

“What’s this? Getting all dressed up and escorting a girl around town? It’s almost like he’s on a date!”

“Lord Hermes...please don’t get carried away and cause any problems.” Asfi, who was also watching inquisitively, halfheartedly tried to rein in her patron god after she observed the telltale signs of his aroused curiosity. “If I remember correctly, the girl with Bell Cranell is from The Benevolent Mistress...”

Asfi noticed an instant change the moment she said that. Lively and meddlesome as always, Hermes had been about to head over to the couple when he suddenly stopped in his tracks. More precisely, he stopped the moment he realized the identity of the girl in the distance. His face twitched.

“Syr? Not Hestia or Aiz...Syr of all people?”

“What do you mean? Isn’t that a bit rude to say?”

Asfi furrowed her brow at his decidedly strange turn of phrase, confused that Hermes was taken aback for once.

The couple were wearing different clothes from usual. And more than anything, the very air around them seemed special. The reason Hermes was shaken—or rather trembling—was because he could tell it was a real date.

“Hey now...is this really okay?” Hermes murmured in shock as he looked back toward Central Park.

His gaze went to the tower of plenty where the goddesses were.

“Ngh. Mm-hmm...*nom.*”

Aiz was walking and eating.

Traces of the grief that accompanied Elegia were still visible on her face as she pulled a Jyaga Maru Kun snack out of the bag she was holding.

She had had a lot of things on her mind and felt rather depressed, so she had decided to get some food for a change of pace, knowing that she couldn't just stay like that forever.

“Pumpkin flavor...It sounded almost heretical, but this is pretty good, too...*nom.*”

The first-tier adventurer's plan to cheer herself up had largely worked, and she sighed contentedly after enjoying the seasonal flavor sold only during the goddess festival.

That was the moment she ran into Bell and Syr.

“.....Huh?”

Bell was obviously dressed up, and Syr's outfit was adorable. Aiz was slow to react, the Jyaga Maru Kun snack still in her mouth.

“A-Aiz...!”

Meanwhile, Bell's face twitched awkwardly.

While he shifted between blushing and turning pale, Aiz's expression was unchanged.

Eh? Bell?

He's different from normal? He's all dressed up? He looks so good?

With the girl from the tavern? The two of them?

—Holding hands.

Words rose to the surface and then disappeared in her mind as her brain struggled to process what she was seeing. They looked like a couple. Aiz froze up, unsure what was going on as Bell frantically tried to say something. But before he could, Syr wrapped her arm around his.

“Good afternoon, Sword Princess. What a surprise running into you here. We're currently on a date!”

“?!”

She leaned against his upper body as she smiled, which caused Aiz's eyes to widen.

Bell's protest of “W-wait! Syr?!” did not reach Aiz's ears.

“We're about to go buy some gifts for the children! Right, darling?”

“Who's *darling*?! And children? You mean Lai and the others, right?!”

Children?! More than one?! The fruits of love?! They're already well beyond simple lovers?!

“?!?!?!”

Aiz's mind was a mess!

She didn't budge, as though she had been struck by lightning, her mouth still full as Syr dragged Bell away. He cried out "Syyyyr?!" pathetically as they disappeared into the crowd.

Aiz remained rooted in place, dumbfounded as she wrestled with an unidentifiable emotion.

It was as if a beloved pet that she had been taking care of behind her parents' back had been stolen away from her without warning. This hollow feeling inside her...

"You there! Wallenwhatsherface!"

"...! Goddess Hestia?"

Aiz had been standing there in shock for a little while when someone called out to her from behind with a clamorous shout.

She turned around just in time to see Hestia in a familiar tavern uniform charging right at her.

"You! Have you seen my Bell?"

"Uh..."

"My cute little Bell is a second-tier adventurer now, so he's gotten a bit famous! Plus, he's adorable! So my plan is to track him by asking people on the street if they've seen him!"

Hestia was excitedly rambling like she had just pulled an all-nighter—though in truth, the insane workload at the tavern had made her strangely hyperactive—and giving Aiz all sorts of unsolicited information.

The goddess looked haggard and was already breathing heavily, seeming as if she had already done quite a lot of running around and asking for leads.

"Anyway! Have you seen my Bell being lovey-dovey with anyone?"

"...Yes, just now. With the girl from the tavern...arm in arm..."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?! Not just holding hands, but full-on cuddling?! Why didn't you tear them apart?!"

"What? Ah...I-I'm sorry..."

Aiz was overwhelmed by the force of Hestia's howl.

"That settles it. You're coming with me! The enemy's far stronger than I could have imagined. There's no choice but to put aside our differences for now and establish a common front!"

"O-okay." Aiz nodded without thinking.

Hestia shouted, "Let's do this!" and then reached a hand into the bag Aiz was carrying, pulled out one of the Jyaga Maru Kun snacks, and bit into it.

Aiz let out a sad gasp as the goddess marshalled herself after a quick recovery and thrust her fist into the sky.

"Let's go, Wallenwhatsyourface! We're gonna take Bell back from Syrwhosit!"

Then Hestia ran off. A short moment later, Aiz finally realized what was going on and chased after her.

I don't really understand, but I should tag along. I get the feeling that's the right choice.

She wasn't quite sure what she was feeling even as she unexpectedly teamed up with Hestia to chase after Bell and Syr.



“H-hold on, Syr!”

I plead pathetically again.

We turn off Main Street and slip onto one of a dozen smaller side paths as if evading pursuit. Syr finally releases my arm after dragging me along the whole way here.

“What is it, Bell?”

“I want to know what that was about! Why did you do that?! And in front of Aiz of all people...!”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? We’re on a date right now, aren’t we?”

“You’re not wrong, but come on!”

I’m pretty sure you phrased it that way to sow maximum confusion...!

I can’t hold back the urge to complain as I try to get out a fully formed response. Hearing that, though, Syr starts to look sad.

“I guess you’d rather be with the Sword Princess instead of with me, then?”

Wh-where did that come from...?

I don’t really know what she meant by that and start panicking.

There’s no way to answer—or rather, I don’t have an answer at all—and I frantically start babbling instead.

“A-anyway, Master didn’t teach me what to do if I happened to run into Aiz...”

And then it dawns on me that I said that aloud.

Syr twitches at that.

“Master...? Teach...?”

Ahh...

O-oh no. I promised not to reveal that I met with him...!

I cover my mouth as Syr studies me carefully before breaking into a smile.

“Hey, Bell? The clothes you’re wearing today, did you really pick them out yourself?”

“Wh-what?”

“Because I happen to know someone whose taste lines up just perfectly with that sort of outfit.”

Badump.

“His name is Hedin.”

Badump, badump.

“By any chance, did he happen to teach you the basics of a date, or—?”

Her words hit the mark perfectly, totally skewering me.

As I break into a sweat, unable to deny or make any excuses, Syr sighs.

“So that’s how it is. I thought something was odd. Like today was a side of you I had never seen before. So it was Hedin’s doing.”

“U-um, you have it all wrong! Well, not really! But he wanted you to enjoy yourself as much as possible...! And I learned a lot from him because that’s what I wanted, too...!”

I hold out my hands, trying to explain myself.

Unable to keep up appearances any longer, I slip back into my normal way of talking. Syr eyes me distrustfully and then turns away like she’s upset. I apologize to Master in my heart over and over as I try to convey how I really feel.

“I felt the same way! I wanted to give you back something, since you’re always helping me! I wanted you to have fun on this date. I wanted to make you smile!”

Maybe my feelings made it through to her?

When she glances back at me, it’s with a smile on her face. Her gentle gaze makes it seem like she hadn’t really been upset at all.

“In that case, I have just one wish. If you can make it come true, then I’ll forgive you.”

“O-one wish...? What is it?” I respond nervously.

It wouldn’t be weird for Master to sentence me to death at any moment now.

She turns back in my direction, and after looking me in the eyes, she comes incredibly close.

“Eep?!”

She *hugs* me.

Even off Main Street, we’re still in the middle of a lot of foot traffic given how many people are walking around to see the festival.

I turn red to the tips of my ears as I distinctly feel her soft breasts press against my body. They’re even larger than I thought. Maybe she really was wearing something special like Fina had said?

Apparently enjoying my panicked reaction, Syr stretches out and brings her lips closer to my face. I tense as they reach my cheeks, just barely not touching me.

“Please take me away,” she whispers.

“Wh-what now?” I instinctively lower my voice in response.

“I’m never really by myself in any real sense. Even right now, people from *Freya Familia* are watching over me.”

“That’s...Well, I did sort of sense it...”

I had noticed them from around the start of the date. The number of eyes on us even right now couldn’t be called few. Even just counting the people I noticed, there might be fifty people here. The observers—no, more likely the guardians—have been watching from nearby without getting too close.

Also, I have the feeling it isn’t just *Freya Familia*, either. The number of watchers definitely increased partway through the date...

It’s worth noting that the moment she hugged me, the hostility directed my way absolutely peaked. There’s still a cold sweat clinging to the back of my neck.

Seriously, who are you, Syr...?

“B-but, even if I wanted to, there’s no way I can get us away from all of them by myself! There’s no chance! It’s *Freya Familia*, after all!”

“That’s why it’s a wish. If you could be my knight in shining armor and spirit me away like the princess in a story, that would make me so happy. I might even forgive you for hiding something from me,” she whispers softly in my ear.

I gulp loudly.

For an instant, Syr is a witch offering a shadowy bargain and I’m a knight forced to obey.

She’s still clinging to me as curious gazes continue to gather on us. The murmurs only lasted a moment, and now teasing, playful cheers are starting to swell. More importantly, the waves of bloodlust increasing with every passing moment are getting harder and harder to endure...!

“I want to be truly free and be able to have fun doing all sorts of things to my heart’s content...And at the moment, I’d like to go on a real date with you, Bell.”

For that brief moment, it feels like something ever so slightly changes in her voice. Her face is so close to mine that I can’t actually see it well, but I get the sense that last part was the complete truth, something Syr had actually been hiding deep in her heart. It wasn’t so over the top as a plea, but there was a sort of romantic anticipation to it, an *it would be nice if it could ever come true* sort of feeling. Her own little selfish wish. That’s what it felt like to me.

“Is that no good?”

Her request rings in my ears.

...If even this is a calculated ploy, then I know I’ll never be a match for Syr—really, no man would ever be able to contend with any woman.

At this point, I decide it’s fine whether I’m being tricked or not and resign myself to what’s about to happen. I may have even smiled a little when I gave up.

I place my hands on her shoulders and push her back a little bit to look her in the eyes.

“Your wish is my command...”

She seems truly happy as she smiles at that.



“The target is currently en route to the northwest district via side paths. It is a crowded and jumbled network of roads, so it will be difficult to maintain line of sight from above. Change formation and report back to Hedin to be safe,” a short man directed.

“Sir!”

The members of *Freya Familia* reacted immediately.

As they watched the white-haired boy escorting the girl with blue-gray hair, their gazes were as intense as if they were staring down a sworn enemy.

Van was charged with leading one of the units guarding Syr. In his thirties, he had an attractive, androgynous face, was short, had an odd air about him, and in general appeared to be a somewhat sloppy sort of man.

He was a half prum, the child of a prum and a human who were jokingly known as Shota Verse and Loli Justice among deities. At 150 celches tall, he was tall enough to be envied by prums but short enough that his stature was often the butt of jokes made by full-grown men of other races, which had made it difficult for him to find a place where he belonged. Because of that, he had constantly been the target of derision. He had heard that mixed-race children were discriminated against much more before the era of gods, but as far as he was concerned, it was still plenty difficult to get by in the current day.

The one who had dispelled the sullen inferiority complex and anger that consumed him had been Freya—and *Freya Familia*. Because of that, he swore his fealty to the goddess who had recognized him for himself and to the people who surrounded her. And precisely because of that, he loathed Bell Cranell for stealing away Syr, the girl who might be called the biggest latent bomb in the familia.

The nerve, holding hands with her...!

The lower-tier adventurers of *Freya Familia*, those under Level 2, were not aware of this current mission. In fact, they were not even aware of Syr’s existence. Even among the second-tier adventurers, only those whose true strength had been recognized were in the know. Ottar, the rest of the familia’s core forces, and Freya herself were all reluctant to share the information. That was just how closely guarded a secret Syr’s existence was for the familia.

Despicable, crafty rabbit...If you dare try to take her someplace

suspicious, I'll bring the wrath of the gods down on you. There'll be no waiting for an order from Hedin or the others!

It would've been a challenge to find a person in *Freya Familia* who did not hate Bell Cranell. There was no denying the unbelievable speed with which he had grown, but logical understanding and emotional acceptance were two different things.

And perhaps it was only natural. They had been applying themselves diligently for so long to earn their goddess's love, only for this boy to appear out of nowhere and captivate the object of their desire. It would have taken a saint to rise above the maddening jealousy, and Van doubted even a saint could manage it.

The captain is the weird one for sure.

Because of that mindset, there was little that could have been done about the roiling bloodlust seething away inside the members of *Freya Familia*.

The fact that Bell Cranell could not only sense that growing hostility, but then deftly lured them into a convoluted network of backstreets in order to discern their general positions was a sign of how much he had grown.

"...? He went into a store by himself?"

Descending a stairwell that led belowground, Bell had entered a shop. If it had been a business of a dubious nature, that would have been enough justification for them to give him a taste of their wrath, but Syr had remained outside in front. There was no chance of anything untoward happening, and they could not verify the nature of the shop he had gone into, since they could not simply walk by and check the sign while Syr stood directly out front.

The most they could do was grumble about how he had left Syr alone outside in a run-down part of town—though of course, if a hoodlum approached her, Van and his unit would take care of it in no time.

Really, it almost seemed like he was waiting for the guards to make a move. His actions were being scrutinized to an unbelievable degree. Van had plenty of experience as an adventurer, and he was skilled enough to glean the intent of his target by watching the subtlest of movements.

He's sensed our presence...? Is he really trying to give us the slip?

It was merely a suspicion, but there was enough reason to suspect a ruse. This mission required Van to always prepare for the worst possible situation.

But if I try to probe around the shop while Lady Syr is standing out front like a lookout...Should I ask Hedin or Allen for an order? Hegni and Alfrik's group are somewhere else, too...

Van's unit was scattered around the dark alleys and corners as

well as various second- and third-floor windows. Hedin and the others would be higher up in order to maintain a commanding view of the whole area. First-tier adventurers had monstrous vision, but deep in a claustrophobic backstreet like this with lots of obstructions in the way, they would not be able to confirm any details on their own. That was why Van had proactively sent out a report earlier, but...

While his thoughts were still racing, Bell came back out.

There's nothing particularly different about him. He's got a piece of luggage he didn't have before, though...

He had emerged with a leather trunk, as if it was something he had prepared in advance for the date and left there to be picked up. After he and Syr exchanged a few words, she looked excited. Her anticipation for some sort of surprise was clear as day.

Suspicious. Far too suspicious. There was nothing specifically questionable about anything he was seeing, but that merely made Van's alertness spike all the higher.

Finally, the two of them held hands and began to move again. They were headed toward Northwest Main Street, the area also known as Adventurers Way.

Van told one of his subordinates to check the store Rabbit Foot had gone into while he and the rest continued to tail the couple.

The two of them left the backstreets and turned onto Adventurers Way as expected and then went into a two-story item shop. It was a famous shop among adventurers: Retale. It was a small retail shop that sold a variety of goods made by various familias. It handled a particularly wide range of things even aside from potions and other items meant for adventurers. Van had even heard that they carried premium *Soma Familia* wine as well as novelty accessories and miscellaneous goods. It would not be very odd at all for a couple to go there in search of a fashionable luxury item.

Van signaled with his hand, giving orders to his six subordinates. Two of them would enter and explore the store in the guise of customers while he and the rest would take up positions outside.

His plainclothes subordinates went inside. Five minutes passed.

There was no movement.

"...?"

Nothing particularly abnormal occurred. But something that could only be called instinct was bugging him. Just as Van's apprehension began to truly peak, the pair he had sent into the shop dashed out, looking pale.

"Lady Syr and Rabbit Foot aren't there!"

"What?!"

"We searched the entire interior and couldn't find them! They aren't hiding anywhere...!"

Van was stricken.

They were not inside. But there had been no sign of any suspicious figures leaving the premises, either. Naturally, the five lookouts had been watching the main entrance as well as the back door, but they had also been keeping an eye on every window, too. And there was no opportunity for the two of them to put on disguises and leave separately without getting spotted, either, since Van had been extra vigilant against the possibility of that exact scheme.

He glanced over at his animal person subordinate who stood atop a nearby building and only received a frantic shake of the head in reply; there was no trace of their scents, either.

What?! How?! Was there a hidden passage in the shop?!

Van froze in shock. Just then, the familia member who had been checking the previous shop came sprinting out of the alley.

“Sir! The store Rabbit Foot entered before was the Witch’s Hideaway—a store for mages!”

Van’s eyes widened at the panicked report.

“A magic item?!”



“I-is this really okay...?!”

I can feel the tremors of a huge commotion rising in the distance. It definitely isn’t the normal hustle and bustle of the festival. I’m clutching a trunk in my left hand and Syr’s hand in my right as I turn pale from hearing what sounds like absolute pandemonium breaking out.

We’re currently running through the alleys so fast that the cloak covering us peels off, making us visible again.

“Wow! You really do become invisible when wearing this!”

Syr somehow manages to catch the cloak as it threatens to blow away completely, and a stir runs through the bystanders around us as we suddenly appear out of thin air.

There were two magic items at work here: a Reverse Veil and a scent remover.

The alley shop I ducked into is run by the mage Lenoa—one of Fels’s acquaintances—and also contains a hidden warehouse filled with magic items. When I begged her for help, even though she looked exasperated, she let me put a few magic items into a trunk to take with me.

“Fels said I should lend you a hand if you asked, but...to think the Sage’s magic items would be used to help some lovestruck fool elope.”

She seemed really unhappy about it, though!

Using what we got from the shop, we managed to shake our tail

after going into the item shop. While pretending to look around the store, we used Fels's top-tier scent remover that could even throw off an animal person's nose. Then it was just a matter of waiting for a moment when no one was looking to go invisible using the Reverse Veil.

That was how we walked right out the front door and escaped *Freya Familia*'s surveillance. The Sage's magic items that had been so useful during the Daedalus Street battle have worked once again, securing our escape.

"Ahhh! You're amazing! Please whisk me away somewhere no one will ever find us, Bell!"

"This *really* isn't the time to be messing around!"

Syr is getting just a little too excited as we run away hand in hand. It's almost like we're actually eloping.

Assuming we really did break out of *Freya Familia*'s perimeter, I'm still really uneasy. They have definitely realized by now that we've escaped. And I can't even begin to guess what they'll do to me now that they think I've kidnapped Syr.

Master might just tear me to shreds and dump what's left in the sea!

I'm starting to think I really shouldn't have done this, but what's done is done. And besides...

"Let's go, Bell!"

Seeing Syr's happy smile as she runs along beside me, I can't do anything but smile back.



"They got away, meow?!" Ahnya shouted.

She, Runoa, Chloe, and Lyu were all stunned after realizing that Bell and Syr had disappeared at some point.

"They slipped away?"

Aiz was surprised.

She had only just caught up to them and gotten close enough to lay eyes on them. Hestia stood beside her, panicking.

"They shook you idiots off?!" Allen roared.

He had suspected that the Sword Princess might be trying to intervene, so he had been getting ready to head over to stare her down right as the shocking report came in.

"Good grief..." Hedin sighed.

His eyes alone had caught the pair fleeing down a back alley, but he pretended not to notice as he gave the panicking familia members orders to set up a new perimeter in the exact opposite direction of where the couple had run off.

""""Find him!!!""""

The Goddess Festival's tumult reached its highest peak ever on this day.



Syr and I are speeding through the northwest district. We avoid large streets, choosing alleys and winding side streets where it's easier to escape notice. The uproar in the distance—or rather the furious shouts—is just one sign of *Freya Familia*'s rage. Running away with the person they were guarding is the same as picking a fight with them, and it isn't going to end well for me if they find us!

“Ah-ha-ha!”

This whole time, Syr has just been laughing and smiling, without any thought for how I feel about all this!

Being by herself—breaking free—she seems happier now than at any other part of the day. It's the first time I've ever seen her laughing out loud this way. As if just running together like this is so much fun she can't help herself. Our fingers are interlaced, and she's squeezing my hand tight.

The side street we're barreling down is long, narrow, and filled with stands. The other people out walking around pause to watch in wonder or else jump clear and stare as we run by.

With Syr in her dress and me in my gentleman's clothes leading her by the hand while trailing a trunk behind us, it wouldn't be a stretch to guess we're a young noble lady and her butler. It's like we're on the verge of missing the departure of a ship that'll take us on a grand adventure. Honestly, it actually feels more like we're escapees on the run from big, intimidating guards!

“This is like living a scene out of a storybook! I doubt I'd ever get bored when I'm with you, Bell!”

“I'd rather not have this sort of thing happen every day!”

We finally start to slow down as we come to a neat little stone bridge spanning a waterway. After stopping in the middle, I let go of Syr as we try to catch our breath. Even though I'm a top-tier adventurer, my breathing is still a little ragged. Fear of the enemy I just made and the imminent danger looming over me has sent my pulse sky-high and messed up my breathing technique.

Wiping the sweat off my face, I rest my hands on my knees as I try to recover.

“I'm sorry...for making such...an unreasonable request. But...it really feels like I'm floating on sunshine. It's so, so...fun.”

Turning around, I see Syr holding a hand to her chest and notice how her cheeks are flushed. She's panting hard, her chest going up and down with each breath. Her tone has become more carefree, and

it's almost like I'm face-to-face with the real, unadulterated Syr.

—In a way, describing her as a young noble lady might be more accurate than I thought.

Catching a glimpse of this new side to her naturally brings a smile to my lips. The two of us are just looking at each other as we stand on the deserted bridge, with nothing but the blue sky above to watch us.

“Still though, to actually manage to escape from Allen and them... you've really become an amazing adventurer.”

Syr brushes out her ruffled hair, grinning as if it was something I had managed to do on my own. I can only smile wryly.

It's Fels's magic items that are really amazing...and I have a feeling that the reason we haven't already been overwhelmed by a slew of pursuers is because Master pulled some strings for us. I could definitely see him sighing as he cleaned up after his foolish disciple.

Still though...they have far more people. The odds definitely aren't in our favor. We can't just wait for the storm to pass, but it would probably be better to stay put and hide out for a bit to let things settle down some...

As imperfect as it is, that's what my instinct as an upper-tier adventurer is telling me. While Orario is a massive city, if we just keep running all over the place, they'll eventually catch us. I know from bitter personal experience just how terrifying human wave tactics can be after facing *Apollo Familia* and *Ishtar Familia*.

Plus, I really want to give Syr a chance to rest...

“...? Hmm? Is this...?”

Looking around, I realize where we are—right around the center of the seventh district in the northwest. The stone buildings around here are noticeably older-looking than the other parts of the city. I'd been here beforehand while scouting places out for the date. Nearby is a place that I had been thinking of visiting today.

“...Syr, there's something I wanted to show you. Would you mind if I took you there now?”

“Not at all. Where is it?” she responds happily, a smile in her eyes.

“The cathedral.”



The building is over one hundred meders tall when counting the bell towers. The giant rose-tinted window in the front can't be missed. With a bell tower flanking it on either side, the entire structure has an imposing presence. The walls are covered with sculptures in high relief. It's hard to imagine how they carved such detailed work in all sorts of places.

As a whole, this place is enormous and imposing. A building that inspires awe in those who lay eyes on it—Hulrand's Cathedral, one of

Orario's major landmarks visited by countless travelers.

"Two please?"

"Rabbit Foot...ah, pardon me. Please go ahead."

I pay the Guild worker working at the gate.

I guess he reflexively reacted to seeing an upper-tier adventurer due to his job, but he smiles and lets us through.

"You're a real celebrity now," Syr whispers playfully in my ear.

"Please don't make fun of me," I grumble in embarrassment as we approach the main entrance.

A sculpture of the knight and spirit is carved in relief above the entrance, peering down at us as we pass through the gateway and are greeted by an enormous space.

"Waaah...amazing..."

That's how I feel, too.

Between the central nave and the aisles on the sides, it's probably sixty meters across. And it's probably double that or more deep. The ceiling is tall, giving the interior a wide-open feeling, and I can't help but stare up at it.

There's a painting on the ceiling continuing the spirit-and-knight motif. Unlike before, though, there is one other figure. A saint stands there, and the knight is beside her, weeping as he cradles the spirit's lifeless body in his arms.

Set off from the aisle is an arcade, a uniform clerestory, tall pillars, and blue-silver statues. Then rows and rows of pews.

A building worthy of being called a cathedral.

We naturally shift to softer voices as we follow the path through the cathedral.

"Normally, parts of it are closed to the public, but apparently, those areas are open during the Goddess Festival...I'm sorry, I just really wanted to come here." I smile meekly, scratching my head apologetically.

"Hee-hee. I don't mind. I rather like it, too," Syr replies, her eyes relaxing as she wears a gentle smile.

We reach the stained glass windows that line the side wall. Towering pillars surround us as we linger in the soft light filtering inside.

There's the Guild member in festive regalia, an adventurer who had volunteered to work during the festival, and some gnomes on guard as well, but it's emptier inside than I had expected. I guess everyone is out enjoying the festival, or else visiting some of the other famous places around the city. The few other guests stopped here and there around the enormous cathedral, examining every little thing with deep interest. Not that I'm one to talk.

Walking clockwise from the left aisle, we finally reach the back of

the cathedral to stand beneath a majestic blue-and-purple stained glass window depicting the knight and the saint. A crystal coffin is enshrined here, clad in a delicate blue metal ornamentation that almost looks like armor. This is the altar where the cathedral's relic is held—the inner shrine.

“This is...”

“Apparently, it contains the remains of the spirit. Some say she looks like she's simply sleeping even to this day, still as beautiful as ever. According to legend, her body scattered into countless crystals. And others claim she transformed into a weapon, becoming a spirit sword.”

“Is that the so-called spirit's miracle...?”

“The coffin has been completely sealed shut, so it can't be opened...but it's a fact that undines have been protecting it for thousands of years.”

I focus on the blue coffin illuminated beneath the stained glass. I can't really explain why, but for some reason I almost want to cry. Part of it is probably that I had finally gotten to visit the shrine that I had only ever read and heard about, and part of it is probably the general solemn atmosphere of the cathedral. But the biggest reason is that I know the story behind this building.

“Is this the place that you wanted to see?”

“Yes. I was thinking if I was going to take you somewhere...if I wanted to show you something that was special to me, then this is probably the place.”

Hulrand's Cathedral is an historical building associated with a certain heroic epic, a story that actually occurred here in Orario. The structure itself is standing proof of the events that transpired in the ancient past.

There are actually several other buildings like this in Orario that have been carefully preserved. Babel is the most famous example. And among those buildings that have survived, there are many temples and churches built before the age of gods here in the city's northwest. In fact, *Hestia Familia's* old hideaway home wasn't that far from here, either. I have a hunch that church is also the remains of a building that had been constructed in the ancient era, too.

But at the same time, it's shocking to think something as large as this cathedral could fade into the background when compared to the sheer scale of Orario. There are taller buildings, of course, like Babel and several other examples, but it really drives home just how large and sprawling the city is.

“There's an epic called *Hulrand of Water and Light*, a pretty well-known story that's in *Dungeon Oratoria...*”

“Ah yes, I know that story, too. I read it for the children at the

orphanage once when they asked me to.”

Actually, I had come by this cathedral dozens of times before. For people interested in the epics, this is a must-see location up there with the monument to the heroes in the Adventurers Graveyard.

And I had really wanted to see this shrine, which is open to the public specially for the festival.

“It’s a story of a knight and spirit joining forces and battling the monsters emerging from beneath the earth, and they get married in the end, right?”

“It’s portrayed that way in children’s stories, but the actual story is a bit different.”

“Eh?”

Syr turns to look at me, but another group had just entered the shrine room. Letting them stand in front of the altar, the two of us sit down on the front-most pew.

“When Hulrand met the spirit, he swore his love to her, but there was a saint who had adored him since long before that meeting and had continued to support him throughout their adventures as well. His heart wavered between the two of them...and in the end, he chose the saint.”

“...Really?”

“Yes. The spirit fell into despair and cried so much that her tears formed a lake...and driven mad by love, she tried to kill Hulrand.”

The bit about her tears had to be an exaggeration, but Lolog Lake lies to the southwest of Orario, and it’s sometimes said that the waterways that still run through the city to this day were born from that spirit’s tears. I learned that after researching it together with Haruhime, who was familiar with the same epic.

“What happened in the end?”

“In the version I read...it’s written that, ultimately, the spirit protected the knight she loved.”

“Protected?”

“From the fangs of monsters who attacked him. She sacrificed herself to save Hulrand’s life.”

“...”

“In the book, it’s written that he held her body and mourned her more than anyone else. And that he raised this cathedral here.”

That scene of the spirit and knight and the saint is depicted on the ceiling above us. *Hulrand of Water and Light* is a tragic story. It was written that, despite the glories and feats he had accomplished, the knight who had devoted himself to exploring the ancient Dungeon and protecting the fortress that preceded Orario was afflicted by self-hatred for the rest of his life.

At the same time, though, the story spoke between the lines of

love as a thing capable of transforming both people and spirits. If Hulrand had not chosen the saint, if he had been wedded to the spirit, maybe none of them would have had to suffer like that. Or perhaps that would merely have resulted in a similarly tragic fate for the saint. There is no way to know.

But I feel like this spirit's coffin, protected still to this day, was Hulrand's everything.

"Some of the heroes that I love made mistakes. There were some who were unable to protect the people precious to them...but through the stories, it feels like they're urging us not to end up like that ourselves. Like they're telling us to never give up. That's...um...I don't really know what I was trying to say with this, but...ummm..."

"Hee-hee! It's okay, because I understand why you brought me here."

Syr still smiles for me, even though I had started running my mouth without being able to finish the line of thought.

"This cathedral, and the stories of the heroes, they're your roots," Syr says slowly as she looks at the altar.

"Um...Yeah. At least I like to think that's true."

I couldn't really stick the landing, but at least she seems to have enjoyed herself. I had maybe secretly been hoping that she would like this place, too. If there's any place where I can be a better guide than anyone else, it would probably be the ones connected to the old heroes.

"Ah, but I do have a bit of a question, though."

"What is it?"

"Why is the cathedral named after the knight? Normally, you would name it after the person enshrined here, right?" she asks, cocking her head.

Ah, that.

"The spirit who was with Hulrand never once revealed her name, apparently."

"Eh?"

"Even in the epics, she's only described as an undine, a water spirit...That's why the cathedral has taken the name of the knight who built it."

Though it was possible that it had a different name long ago, and someone later decided that Hulrand's name was more appropriate based on all the ornamentation.

"She didn't reveal her name..."

Syr freezes. Hearing that, she seems to sink into thought as she looks off into the distance.

"Why...why did the spirit not reveal her name?"

"Eh?"

“If her true name...Did she think that if her secret were revealed, everything would be ruined?”

Her gaze is fixed on the altar, as if asking the spirit resting there in the coffin. Dazzling, heartrending light shines down through the stained glass, illuminating her face.

I forget to breathe. I don't have an answer for her. I can't say anything, entranced by the sight of her staring at the shrine.

“Bell.”

“Wh-what?”

“If I ever started behaving strangely, what would you do?”

“...Huh?”

“If, out of sadness or out of rage, I ever tried to hurt someone, like the spirit resting in that coffin...what would you do?”

It's an odd question. The idea of her doing something like that is so hard to imagine that it takes me a second to get my tongue to work, but I don't need any additional thought to respond.

“...I would stop you so that you wouldn't hurt anyone.”

She is still looking forward, not at me.

“And also in a way that wouldn't hurt you, either.”

My soft words hang in the air. They're neither a lie nor misdirection. Lying in a place where a spirit is enshrined would be unforgivable.

Hearing that, Syr's response is simple.

“That's all?”

“Huh?”

“You wouldn't scold me for doing it?”

“Eh? Huh?”

“You wouldn't squeeze me tightly in your embrace and whisper, ‘You've been a bad girl. I'm going to watch over you forever, so you never do anything bad again. I hope you're ready for that’ and then take me home with you?”

“Of course not!!”

What kind of guy do you think I am?!

My shocked shout echoes loudly in the solemn cathedral, drawing a flurry of disapproving glares from the Guild employee, from the adventurer, and from the gnomes, too. I stand up and bow my head apologetically.

Embarrassed, I sit back down as Syr giggles softly.

I—I was just answering her seriously...

“You really are kind.”

I start to sulk a bit at her teasing when I feel something on my shoulder. Syr is leaning over and resting her head on my shoulder. Our shoulders are touching. She places her hand on top of mine resting in my lap.

For a moment, my mind blanks out.

“—Ahhh, I really do like you.”

And when I hear that whisper, those words that might be just my misunderstanding, it feels like my body temperature explodes upward. The center of my chest is burning. I can't speak. How do you breathe again?

This time, it's my turn to just keep staring forward. I don't know what to do with the warmth I can feel so clearly right next to me. Her hair spills over, tickling my neck. But her eyes are closed, and she has the faintest smile on her lips. I can tell that much just from intuition.

It almost feels like her serene pulse is overwriting my racing heartbeats.

It would be nice if I could just convince myself that being able to hear the sound of someone's heart through mere skin contact isn't possible...

The light filtering into the cathedral is dazzlingly radiant, but I don't mind it at all. The sunlight just feels warm on my skin as I sit there together with her.

She in turn looks at the shrine, then occasionally gazes at me. It all feels like a scene from a different world. Just the two of us in the quiet, cool-yet-warm cathedral. It's as if, for a tranquil moment in time, we can only sense each other and nothing else. A moment where words are unnecessary—and then the sound of grand bells ringing brings it to a sudden end.

“...! The bell towers...?”

How long have we been here? I realize that the light filling the cathedral has taken on a red tint. The sun has long since started its journey down in the west.

Syr raises her head, as if waking from a dream. I quickly stand up to hide the embarrassment welling up inside me all of a sudden.

“S-Syr! I have a reservation for dinner tonight! We have to be careful about *Freya Familia* finding us, but i-it might best to head there early...!” All of Master's lessons are forgotten as I start stumbling over my words. I've literally lost all composure, but I can't help it. That intimate moment just now wasn't fair at all. There's no way I could remain calm after that. Trying my best to not dwell on it, I immediately push my unease into a corner, not even giving myself the time to collect myself.

After that moment's indecision, I hold out my hand. Syr looks up at me with clear eyes. I stand there beneath the sunlight, feeling my face heating up as I wait. Finally, she beams.

“Let's.”

She places her soft hand in mine again.

Passing through the exit, I notice the sun is really starting to sink in the sky. The bustle of the festival that had not registered at all inside the cathedral soon swallows us up again.

The voices and music are still lively as ever, as if to declare that the festival isn't over yet.

The cityscape lit by the western sun takes on a golden hue, bringing to mind the image of a bountiful fields of wheat rustling in the wind.

"Mister! Miss! Could I interest you in something?"

"Hmm...?"

There is an animal person calling out to us a little ways from the exit, on the edge of the plaza in front of the cathedral. It's a street vendor with goods lined up on a cloak laid out on the ground.

"You just visited the cathedral, right? In that case, why not get a souvenir to remember it by? I have paired accessories that would be perfect for a lovely couple!"

"Paired accessories?"

She took the bait!

Before I can stop her, Syr wraps her arm around mine and says, "Let's go look!" as she drags me along.

When we reach the werewolf wearing all sorts of silver jewelry, he confidently winds up to deliver his pitch.

"I'm the craftsman Gordon! I'm second to none when it comes to silver working, and I've got a collection of goods here that are sure to be perfect for you!"

"Oooh."

"I recommend this set here! These pieces are two halves of a whole. If you put them together like this, then *bam*, they seamlessly come together!"

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm."

"It goes great as an ornament for your hair, and for the young man, it can be worn as a necklace! And just for you, I can offer a special price!"

He had pointed to a pair of silver accessories with blue embellishments where each half looked almost like an ocarina or a comma. By joining the two, they fit together just right to create a circular pendant.

"It's also a charm to ward off evil!"

"Oh really?"

"Yep! I imbued them with prayers when I made them to protect their owners from experiencing the same grief that the knight and spirit suffered!"

A craftsman's thoughts and prayers aren't enough to make a charm, but even as I have that thought, Syr is already leaning in,

deeply intrigued. Wait, her eyes are gleaming...

"Normally, it would be two thousand valis for the pair, but since you two make such a wonderful couple, I guess I can part with them for only a thousand valis."

H-he cut off half the price without us even saying anything...

I'm at a loss for words when suddenly...

" — "

Syr is looking over at me.

My face twitches as I notice her gaze. I can feel her anticipation.

If I'm being honest, I don't really want to buy it. Not because I don't have the money, or because it's a hassle...It's mostly because it keeps reminding me of what just happened inside the cathedral, and that's making me feel a bit odd.

...But Master talked about this before...

"There's no reason to obsess over objects as long as you have the memories, but understand that people also derive joy from having a physical reminder of a memory."

I manage to hold in my sigh as I quietly give in.

"Then I'd like to buy that pair, please."

"Gladly!"

I hand over the money, and he passes the pendant to Syr.

"Here you go, miss."

"Woow...!"

It is remarkable how excited she seems holding it in her hands. This is like watching a child get a new toy. Almost as if she didn't actually believe I would really buy it for her. She carefully separates the two parts and flips them back and forth a few times, examining both sides to check something.

"Can I have the spirit one? You should take the knight's side!"

"Ha-ha...That's fine with me."

After pressing her half to her chest for a moment, she slips it into her hair.

"How does it look? Does it suit me?"

"Yes...it suits you perfectly."

It isn't a lie. Both the merchant and I are enchanted by how lovely she looks with the silver hair decoration. And the blue ornaments adorning it glisten brilliantly in the evening sunlight. She shines just as much as she bashfully grins.

Touching the accessory, she breaks into a beaming smile.

"I'll treasure this, Bell!"



Night slowly starts to approach from the east as the falling sun sets the

western sky ablaze.

And, as if urged on by the night drawing near, lights start to blink on around the city—both streetlights and magic-stone lamps inside hollowed-out pumpkins placed on barrels and boxes.

We return to the southwest of the city, sticking to back alleys and side streets as much as possible to avoid being spotted, but we just press on decisively when we reach bigger streets that we need to cut across. Trying to sneak around out in the open would just attract *Freya Familia*'s attention. They should be on the lookout all around the city at this point, so it's just a test of luck now.

Besides, I told Master where I made the reservation before the date, so he might help us out a bit and misdirect them...at least, it would be nice if he did.

While I am vigilantly scanning our surroundings and doing my best to blend inconspicuously into the crowds, Syr is behaving like normal without me having to say anything.

She keeps asking me over and over “Does this suit me?” and “What do you think of this?” I fight to keep up my smile while answering “It suits you well” and “It looks pretty on you” every time.

“Eh-heh-heh...”

She also breaks into a renewed bashful smile every time.

S-so cute...Wait!

Maybe it's just because of how different it is from how she always behaves, but seeing her so defenseless and excited brings out an odd feeling in me. I've long since lost the composure of a gentleman leading a lady that Master had so painstakingly drilled into me.

Syr would wrap her arm around mine and lean against me like a playful puppy whenever she saw an opening, but after fending off her advances for some time, we finally reach the front of the restaurant.

“It's...a boat?”

Her eyes open wide.

And she's exactly right. We are standing in front of a giant ship anchored on the water's edge.

“Is this the place?”

“Yes. It's a restaurant called Spoon Aqua.”

I made a reservation at a sailing restaurant.

The pure-white ship is so large that Syr has to look up at it as she stands there, still in shock.

It is not quite on the level of a luxury cruise liner, but it's over fifty meders long. More than large enough to hold all of Hearthstone Manor. A big, showy banner stretches across the ship as it floats idly in the wide waterway. A well-appointed attendant stands at the end of the bridge leading up to the ship next to a stylish sign that has WELCOME ABOARD! written in Koine.

“This is a sailing restaurant, right? I’ve heard there are several of them in Orario, but...”

“Yes, normally they stay in the docks, but as a special occasion during the festival, they take a loop around Orario’s waterways.”

“Then that means...it’s a dinner cruise?”

I nod with a smile.

Normally, the Spoon Aqua stays moored during business hours, and guests simply get to enjoy the novel experience of having dinner aboard the ship. Originally, the owners had bought an old ship, then had it transported into the city in pieces, rebuilt, and transformed into a chic restaurant.

From here in the southwest near the Trading Post to the south of the city where the shopping district stood, every bit of land is already taken and there’s no room for more buildings, so the owners probably had an idea like “If we can’t do it on land, then let’s open a restaurant on the water!” Obviously, they couldn’t set out across the sea from Orario itself, but they could at least sail a loop around the city’s waterways.

I really struggled when it came to picking the restaurant...

This was probably the biggest risk I had taken when planning the date. I desperately researched restaurants while Master cracked the whip before finally settling on this one. The food is apparently delicious, and with the money I had earned during Master’s training, covering two people shouldn’t be a problem.

But the biggest consideration was that I thought a normal restaurant wouldn’t really satisfy Syr, since she’s always working at The Benevolent Mistress. Mia’s cooking is fantastic, too, so I had thought that maybe eating on board a ship would be a new and interesting experience.

Either way, this was the choice I made, channeling all of my meager wisdom into a small surprise attack.

Syr’s expression shifts.

“That’s wonderful. You put a lot of thought into choosing this place, didn’t you? The Bell who never thinks about anything other than the Dungeon actually thought long and hard about how to make me happy!”

Sh-she saw right through me...

I can’t do anything other than smile awkwardly when she puts it that way. But, well, at least she seems to appreciate it...I guess I should just be grateful for that.

Syr is in a cheery mood as she grabs my hand, not wanting to wait. The two of us walk across the wooden ramp that leads up to the boat. Once aboard, I give my name, and we’re promptly led to a table on the deck.

Waiting for us is a stylish white table and matching chairs with a vase of flowers as the centerpiece. And there are several identical tables all around. As someone who's never really been anywhere nicer than an adventurer's tavern, I feel really out of place. I am starting to regret pushing my limits a bit as I desperately try to remember the various things Master drilled into me during our training.

At last, the evening sun begrudgingly dips below the horizon and the sky turns dark.

That's when an announcement comes from inside the ship.

"The Spoon Aqua will now set sail. Please enjoy your time aboard."

And with that short notice, the ship slowly begins to move.

As we pull away from shore, I privately breathe a small sigh of relief. Even *Freya Familia* probably won't be able to attack us once we're away from land. The Spoon Aqua wouldn't keep its boarding ramp out while sailing, either. It'll just cruise down the middle of the waterway that's as wide as any river. And it should be impossible to make the jump from shore.

...It *should be*. Even for *Freya Familia*...

A-anyway, now that we're cruising along, we can enjoy dinner in peace.

...*But still, though, I can already feel several different sets of eyes...*

As the servers gracefully start bringing out wine and the first courses, I can feel my neck starting to tingle.

It isn't bloodlust, though—well, I do detect a little bit of hostility, but it doesn't feel like *Freya Familia*...

"Is something the matter?"

"Eh? Ah, no, nothing at all. A-ah-ha-ha..."

Syr is holding her glass as I laugh awkwardly. She pours me a glass of wine, too, as I try to convince myself that I'm just imagining things.



"Bell! When did he grow up enough to know about such an elegant place...?!"

"It's my first time...having dinner on a ship..."

Hestia and Aiz were having dinner at the same exact restaurant as Bell and Syr aboard the Spoon Aqua.

"No matter what escape you might plot, ace detective Hestia will see through it!"

"Goddess, that was amazing..."

While Hestia was devouring her food, Aiz was nodding along as she carefully took a knife to the sole meunière. They were glancing

over at Bell as they ate.

After Bell had escaped surveillance using magic items, Hestia and Aiz had lost track of him just like *Freya Familia*, but they had quickly worked together to follow him.

“Knowing Bell, he’s sure to have left behind flyers or advertisements he collected during his date planning!”

Just wildly searching all around a city as large as Orario would be the height of foolishness. Hestia, who had closely studied his movement and thought patterns, immediately knew the best move to make. She and Aiz dashed back to Hearthstone Manor, broke into the boy’s personal room, and searched high and low for clues until they discovered a pamphlet for Spoon Aqua, just like Hestia had predicted. It had even been neatly circled with a red pen.

Hestia had howled, *“That’s iiiiiiiit!!!”* and led the charge onto the ship. They had been turned away due to the dress code and had to come back, but they had managed to get on board before Bell and Syr after a breakneck dash.

“It’s a good thing you were here, too, Wallenwhatsyourface. I wouldn’t have been able to get in here by myself.”

“I just followed you. I didn’t do anything...Ah, I’ll pay the bill...”

“Eh?! Are you sure?!”

Hestia was wearing a marine-blue dress, and Aiz was wearing a pale-green dress. The same one she had worn to a certain god’s Banquet.

The cruise dinner service was very popular, so normally, Hestia would have been turned away at the door for not having a reservation, but because Aiz was with her, she had gotten a little accommodation from the restaurant. As with so many other businesses, the mere fact of having served a first-tier adventurer was an endorsement that was hard to match.

The two of them slipped on board before sunset and then simply lied in wait for Bell and Syr. And now they could finally put eyes on their target.

“But still, we’re on the inside and they’re on the outer deck... Damn it, she’s already gotten to the final stage. Beeeeeeell, where did you learn something like that?! Invite me out next time!”

“Bell is...kind of handsome...?”

“Ah! Hey now! No getting any weird ideas, Wallenwhatsyourface!”

Even without Hestia’s boisterous squawking, they were already drawing a lot of attention. They were an odd pair to be sure, but Aiz was still *the* Sword Princess and Hestia was the patron goddess of *Hestia Familia*. Whether they got along or not, there were many guests who were curious to see such a beautiful pairing.

Naturally, the two had not noticed it themselves, as their focus was on Bell's table and nothing else.

"Still, I can't really see her face from here..."

There were several guests between their tables, in addition to the glass window separating the interior from the outer deck. Their tables were placed just awkwardly enough that Hestia could not get a clear look at Bell's date.

Honestly, she wanted to barge in on them right then and there, but the food was unbelievably delicious. The frugal goddess decided that there would still be ample time to charge over once she had finished eating.

"..."

Meanwhile, Aiz was watching Bell, filled with an emotion she could not quite understand—almost like she felt indescribably lonely.

"Meeow! It looks so good! Can I take some, meow?"

"Waiters don't steal food. Hurry up and carry it to the table!"

Ahnya and the others were dealing with customers on the same Spoon Aqua where Bell, Syr, Hestia, and Aiz were eating.

"Why are we here, *working*, after going through so much trouble to escape the tavern?"

"What else could we do? This was the only way to sneak into the place they were having dinner! We can't let Peter and his friends' chivalry go to waste after they so kindly yielded their jobs to us for the night, meow!"

"Looked to me like you were pretty menacing with your knife back there."

Runoa grumbled at Chloe's teary-eyed act as the four of them left the kitchen. They were carrying dishes and wine with a practiced ease, dressed in tuxedos.

As for how they made their way on board, Runoa's response was quite succinct.

"If you've got complaints, send them to the kid! If he hadn't chosen a cruise dinner, we wouldn't have had to force our way aboard like this, meow!" Chloe skillfully controlled her voice so that only Runoa and the others could hear her.

The reason they had managed to get on board before Bell and Syr was simple: They had seen Hestia screaming as she dashed across the city with Aiz in tow and had simply followed along behind them.

They could guess easily enough that the only reason the sacrifice who was supposed to be working at the tavern for them would be running off somewhere in such a panic would be because she was searching for her cute little Bell.

"And besides, we've been trained by Mama Mia. We're specialists

who can match even first-class servers! I'm sure the management here would shed tears of joy to know they had us working for them, meow!"

"How do you figure that...?" Lyu sighed.

She fully acknowledged that she was doing something illicit for the sake of personal interest, but it was also true that if she were not there, then Chloe and the others would most likely have gone wild already.

Holding in another sigh, she peered through the single pane of glass separating her from Bell and Syr enjoying dinner out on the deck.

The deck was being served by different waiters, while they were charged with covering the interior hall, so they wouldn't have an opportunity to go over there.

"Syr...Bell..."

Lyu was still troubled by murky emotions as she watched the two of them.



The food served aboard the Spoon Aqua is as delicious as advertised. I guess they get ingredients from the Trading Post where all sorts of things from outside Orario flow into the city, because several of the dishes featured unusual flavors: a bluish olive oil I had never seen before, a reddish cheese with a distinct smell to it, a spicy pepper grown in the Far East. Sour, salty, a little bit spicy—they were all new, enjoyable flavors.

I guess you could say they had taken gourmet dishes from around the world and rearranged them to make Orario versions.

Syr seems to be enjoying the unfamiliar flavors, too. Maybe she'll even tell Mia about some of the food later.

The main event of the cruise itself is far better than I had expected. Seeing Orario's bustling nightlife from the waterways is a totally different experience compared to seeing it up close on Main Street like usual. It's almost like visiting a foreign country.

Part of it is that things already look quite different due to the festival, but even so, the city flooded with lights is a beautiful sight to behold from the water.

The water's surface shimmers brilliantly as the waves softly lap against the sides of the boat. Syr is looking out, taking in the view.

"What is it? You look like you want to ask something."

Syr is carefully eating the pear-and-cake dessert with a knife and fork. And unlike the stiff table manners that Hedin taught me, she looks utterly at ease and natural. Her gestures are enchanting. It's also

the sort of thing that does not really fit the image of an ordinary neighborhood girl.

“...Umm...Who exactly are you...?”

I can't really shake my unease at asking something like that. But it's something I've been wondering in a corner of my mind all throughout the date. Always being watched and protected by *Freya Familia*...Who exactly is Syr?

Hedin had told me not to probe, but I can't see myself continuing to spend time with her while turning a blind eye to that glaring question.

Syr says, “Ah,” as she carefully sets her silverware down and looks at me.

“Can you promise me nothing will change between us if you hear my secret?”

“P-probably...”

“Probably isn't good enough.” She smiles mischievously, her eyes narrowing like a cat's.

We're totally going at her pace now. The initiative I had seized at the start of the date is long gone.

Doing my best to finish my dessert, I force a smile.

“Whatever secret you might have...everything that has happened between us won't change, and it won't change how we are going forward...at least that's what I think.”

I can't say for sure whether that answer is worthy of full marks. But Syr breaks into a smile as she looks at me. She starts to open her mouth.

Boom!

“Eh?!”

There is sudden jolt as the ship shudders. The impact itself isn't too jarring, more like a small boat had run into the side of the ship. The waitstaff and other guests stir as I quickly turn in the direction of the impact.

Across the deck on the opposite side of the ship, there is a—

“—A-an ice bridge?!”

A narrow part of the waterway has been frozen over, creating a bridge of ice in the air connecting the ship to land. My jaw drops at the sight, but an explanation comes soon enough.

“Take control of the ship!”

The group—or rather the adventurers—roar dangerously as they pour onto the ship!

“I-it can't be...*Freya Familia*...?!”

I almost faint. They had found us on the ship, and their mages had frozen the surface of the water with ice magic, creating a makeshift bridge so they could reach the boat directly!!

“Th-they would go that far?!”



“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Panic spread across the ship in the blink of an eye. A swarm of people clad in black helmets and combat gear, all properly equipped for battle, was pushing its way onto the ship and spreading out. The adventurers, who advanced without a care for the tables overturned in their wake, could only be seen as a black raid. And consumed with the rage of having Syr stolen away from them, they pushed their way through all the guests, checking everyone’s faces as they went.

“Wh-what is that?! Wait, don’t those guys kind of look like the adventurers who attacked us before?!”

“*Freya Familia...*?”

Hestia and Aiz were both surprised as the panic spread around them.

“What’s going on, meow?!”

“Hey, keep this sort of thing to Mama Mia’s bar!”

Ahnya and Runoa and the others were shocked, too.

The dining cruise had transformed into a battlefield.

“Tch. I couldn’t make it in time.”

Watching alone from the coast, Hedin shook his head as he scrutinized the scene at a distance.

Using his position as commander, he had been manipulating *Freya Familia* from behind the scenes, just like Bell had hoped, by carefully maneuvering the dragnet away from Bell and Syr’s location while giving what seemed to be sound orders. And he had done well. Though he had been unable to stop the assault on the ship, his adroit maneuvering was still deserving of praise.

Because he had led Allen, Hegni, and the Gulliver brothers—the first-tier adventurers who would have been the most violent, merciless, and impossible to negotiate with—on a wild-goose chase far, far away from the city’s southwest.

“Listen to you?” “Don’t screw with us.” “You’re hiding something.” They directed the city’s most intense bloodlust and vitriol toward him—more than enough to make an average person faint on the spot—but he had coolly fended off their doubtful eyes and shielded Bell from an instant death. Were it not for Hedin, Bell and Syr would have been apprehended in no time at all.

But in exchange for that, a lower-level squad had slipped through the cracks, and he had not arrived in time to stop the familia members who had spotted the couple from acting on their own judgment.

“So it was Van’s squad...Mindless fools, do you wish to tarnish

Lady Freya's honor?"

The crowds near the shore were gradually noticing the uproar happening aboard the ship. If it became known that *Freya Familia* was the cause of the commotion, Hedin would not be able to look her in the eye. No matter the situation, the reputation of the familia must never be brought into question.

The white elf alone bore the responsibility for the familia's public image, and seeing Van's unthinking charge, his normally intellectual visage warped with rage.

"Find her! Steal her back from that rabbit as soon as possible!"

Meanwhile, unaware of Hedin's seething ire, the half-prum Van was running amok.

He had snapped. After having his mission disrupted, he had become obsessed with making Bell Cranell pay. He had sworn his allegiance to the familia, so he refused to let his failure stand. Even if things got messy, he would not stop until Syr had been stolen back. He was that desperate at this point.

"Take Rabbit Foot down by whatever means necessary! As long as he's around, he might still get the jump on us! Make sure to end him!"

And there was one person who twitched upon hearing his shouted orders: Aiz.

Her eyes flaring, she drew her trusty sword from where it was hidden beneath the table and came out swinging.

"Guh?! Wha—?! Sword Princess?!"

"What did you mean by 'take Rabbit Foot down'?"

Van somehow managed to use his twin blades to defend himself as the identity of his attacker dawned on him.

"I-it's got nothing to do with you! Don't get in our way! Are you seriously going to pick a fight with *Freya Familia*?!"

He was obviously trying to threaten her, but her response was short and simple.

"None of that matters."

Her silver blade flashed, revealing a clear, rock-solid resolve.

"If you are going to bully him, I will stop you."

"O-outsiders should stay out of our business!"

Recoiling at the unexpected presence of a first-tier adventurer, Van roared as he and his subordinates charged all at once. Battle broke out as the Sword Princess entered the fray. Tables were splintered and sliced apart, while chairs were transformed into a hail of wooden shards. The staff and guests burst out into screams of terror. A violent melody of weapons clashing rang out in the night.

"H-hey! Wallenwhatsyourface! What's going on here?!"

Hestia took cover underneath her table, unable to move a step as her cries were drowned out by the deafening sounds of battle.

“A-Aiz is fighting in the hall?! Wh-what’s happening?!”

A panic hit Bell when he realized what was going on inside the ship. A cold sweat instantly formed, and he began to wonder whether maybe he and Syr had gotten caught up in a clash between the two most powerful families.

“Bell Cranell’s over there!”

“Get to the deck!”

“I should have guessed!!”

He yelled after getting confirmation the black raiders were coming for him.

The ship was currently in the middle of a part of the waterway that was the size of a small lake. The ship where no one should have been able to reach them had turned into an inescapable island. Even if he tried to cross the ice bridge *Freya Familia* had made, he would just be overwhelmed by the torrent of enemies still pushing their way across.

Realizing they were cornered, Bell turned pale and stood in front of Syr to protect her.

But at that point, Syr, who had been watching from the sidelines, sucked in her breath before raising her voice.

“Lyu! Everyone! I’m sorry! But please help!”

“Meow?! Syr called us!”

“Maaan, she totally noticed us!”

Ahnya and Runoa emerged from cover, halting the charging adventurers. Chloe and Lyu leaped into action, too, as Bell watched in open shock.

“No clue what’s going on, but if they’re attacking Syr, they’re our enemies!”

“Agreed. We may have been following them, but certainly not in hopes of such a mindless conflict!”

An assassin’s dagger flashed, and twin shortwords sliced through the air. All of the adventurers charging toward the deck were stopped in their tracks by the four girls dressed as waiters.

“Lyu and everyone else, too...What is even happening here...?!”

Bell watched in abject horror as a multifront conflict sprang to life.

At a minimum, *Freya Familia*, Aiz, and the staff from The Benevolent Mistress were all fighting in front of them.

“Shall we go, Bell?”

“S-Syr? Go where? We don’t have anywhere to escape to...!”

And amid all that, Syr’s pumps clicked adorably against the deck as she ran.

Bell frantically chased after her as the night breeze tousled her hair. He was screaming in a corner of his mind about the

ridiculousness of a normal-seeming girl having the courage to run straight across a battlefield without any fear at all!!

No one noticed their quick escape. No one had the composure to pay them any attention.

Soon after, they reached the edge of the deck, bow-side.

Syr did not wait for Bell to catch up as she hopped up and over the guard rails. Bell's eyes bulged as she straddled the railing while holding her skirt down.

"S-Syr?! You can't be...?!"

She could and she was. Glancing over at him, she smiled sweetly.

"I'll leave the rest to you, Bell!"

Bell turned pale and started running as fast as he could, but she just leaned backward. Her body tilted, slipping into the air.

"Ahhhh!"

She let out a cute and decidedly fake-sounding scream that was out of place in the pandemonium breaking out all around them, and she could not stop smiling as she fell down toward the water's surface below.

"No waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!!"

Bell leaped over the rail without hesitation, diving over the edge. He kicked against the hull of the ship once, then twice, picking up speed as he stretched his hand out and caught her.

Trying to cover her in midair, he pulled her head and waist close, holding her against his chest.

Moments later, there was a splash.

A massive splash that escaped everyone's notice.

IVEUGOLO
MONO

© Suzuhito Yasuda

MONOLOGUE IV



The sound of water.

The feel of water.

A world of water with a watery moon rippling in the distance.

A line of air bubbles streamed upward and disappeared as he embraced me, holding me tightly. A slender but sturdy arm wrapped around my waist. A small, gentle hand held the back of my hand.

A tiny gasp became more bubbles, carrying this maddening yearning to the surface. Even though the water all around us should have been cold, there was a warmth in my chest.

My heart ached. It felt like my eyes were going to melt. I couldn't stop the surge of heartrending emotions. Somewhere along the way, his arms had wrapped around my back, holding me tight, as if to reassure me.

A world of water. Just the two of us. Slowly sinking, but never letting go of each other.

Ahhh.

It's melting. My consciousness is melting.

Everything is dissolving, drifting away like an ephemeral dream.

And the last thing that remains is the warmth of his chest. That alone consumes my heart. And it brings me so much joy.

CHAPTER 5
THE PROOF OF C



CHAPTER 5

THE PROOF OF ()

The water surface rocks. Tiny ripples silently run up the shore before receding, transmitting the intermittent impacts originating from the boat floating in the distance.

Then a spray of water breaks the surface.

“Ghah!”

Sucking in a deep breath of fresh air, I bring my hand onto the shore. My clothes feel as heavy as lead as I drag Syr up with my other arm.

“Gh! Ack!”

“Are you okay?!”

I pat her back as she coughs. We’re clinging to the stone-paved shore with only our upper bodies out of the water.

I pull myself onto land.

I had been shocked, and it had taken a lot of stamina, but I’ve gotten fairly used to things like this while exploring the Dungeon. I just ventured into the Water Capital on my last expedition, even. I’m not sure how to feel about this becoming something I’m familiar with, though.

I grimace at the sensation of being totally waterlogged as I hold out my hand and quickly lift Syr up onto shore as well.

I support her as she slumps down, kneeling on the ground. Looking back, I see Spoon Aqua still floating in the distance. The giant hull illuminated by magic-stone lights is rocking violently, indicating that the fighting isn’t over yet. I can hear what sounds like glass shattering and the pained groans of someone getting blown away.

I’m not sure why they were all there, but I am going to have to apologize to Aiz and Lyu and everyone else afterward.

A mix of gratitude and regret fills my heart as I breathe a sigh of relief that there’s no sign of anyone chasing us yet.

We ended up on the side of the boat opposite the ice bridge *Freya Familia* made. The city’s western gate is somewhere behind us. The deserted shore is quiet, beyond the revealing reach of the streetlights.

It seems unlikely that anyone has noticed we escaped the ship yet.

And to be honest, I’d say I did pretty well diving off the deck,

sinking to the bottom of the waterway, and then swimming all the way here, holding Syr the entire time.

“..., ...gh.”

“Syr...?”

I notice Syr is trembling slightly as I hold her against my chest.

Wait, is she crying?

I frantically try to check as she looks down—

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

—when all of a sudden, she bursts out laughing, as if she couldn’t hold it in anymore.

Her reaction startles me, but there’s no stopping her fit of laughter. She’s holding one hand to her mouth while pressing the other against her stomach as she lets out a muffled, innocent laughter I’ve never heard coming from her.

“That was a first!”

“Huh?”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever done something like that!”

Raising her head, she examines me from up close, beaming ecstatically. Her cheeks are flushed with excitement, and her eyes are sparkling like stars. My shoulders slump.

Well, yeah...

An ordinary person would never leap off a boat in order to escape people chasing after her. I guess it’s a testament to how much she trusts me, but that was really, really, *really* reckless.

Hit by a sudden wave of exhaustion, I consider telling her off a bit, but when I see the childlike excitement still visible on her face, I end up just smiling weakly.

“...Can you stand up?”

“Yes!”

I hold my hand out, helping her onto her feet.

My clothes are soaked, and the urge to strip down and wring them out a bit hits hard. I can see puddles forming at our feet.

I shed my jacket in the water. Even for a top-tier adventurer, trying to swim in that while carrying Syr was just too constricting. Oh yeah, I totally forgot the trunk with magic items on the boat. It’d be nice if someone picked that up for me...

My vest clings uncomfortably to my chest as I brush my wet hair out of my eyes,

“—Gh.”

It’s the way Syr looks standing there in front of me. It would have been better if I hadn’t noticed, but I did.

I guess this is what people mean when they say someone’s beauty is palpable.

My eyes dart away quickly, and it seems like she hasn’t noticed

my agitation as she touches her hair and breathes a sigh of relief after confirming that she hadn't lost the souvenir we bought together. She steps out of her waterlogged pumps and hooks her fingers inside them to carry them.

And then—

“Okay, let's go!”

“Eh?”

“We should get away from here! To someplace no one will find us!” she says, still enjoying her brief taste of freedom. “We managed to escape after all, but at this rate, they'll catch up again sooner rather than later!”

There are a plenty of things I'd like to say about that, but her basic point is definitely right. Surely not everyone who was following us charged onto the boat. And it feels like the ones on the boat are starting to get alarmed, as if they've noticed we aren't there anymore.

...Aaaargh. At this point there's no choice but to go!

I arch my back and hop over the sloped embankment to chase after Syr.

We leave the shore behind, slipping into darkness.



The two of us are running along the street.

We're searching for places where there won't be anyone else around, with no particular direction in mind. And as we move farther and farther away from the crowds, the streetlights around us naturally start to disappear. Somewhere along the way, the only things left lighting our way are the moon and stars above.

Syr's footsteps ring out as she runs ahead like a child embarking on a grand adventure.

“You'll hurt yourself running barefoot!” I shout from behind.

“If that happens, you can just give me a piggyback ride!” she calls back delightedly.

She spreads her arms, spinning around as she runs before looking back at me and breaking into a smile as I chase after her.

She really is doing as she pleases, relishing the excitement of the moment, enjoying even the way her breathing turns ragged.

There is no one to question her. No one to stop her.

And the stars above seem to be blessing her freedom. She looks stunning, playing beneath the moonlight. Almost like a spirit. Or like a sweet, young goddess who has just been born.

I keep running after her, as if I'm being drawn along by her presence.

The two of us dash through a solitary moonlit world together.

And finally...

"This is..."

As if waking from a dream, we stop when we see it.

A giant stone bridge. Over sixty meders long and ten meders wide. The water burbles beneath as it passes through the arches supporting the bridge. Made from countless quarried stones, it looks like any ordinary bridge other than feeling a little bit old—if we ignore the thirty-one statues lining it, that is.

These are all monuments to famous heroes.

"The Bridge of Heroes..."

It's called that out of respect by both adventurers and the residents of Orario.

The legacy of great people from the ancient times who had continued to fight while risking life and limb in order to seal the Dungeon. The statues lining this bridge were made in the likenesses of the greatest heroes who formed the cornerstones of the surface world's bulwark. Unlike the jet-black monument in the Adventurers Graveyard, this bridge of statues had been built before the age of deities began. It has been broken and destroyed countless times by monster attacks, natural disasters, and conflicts between people, but at some point, someone would always repair the bridge and restore the statues, preserving the physical link connecting the past to present day. As if to declare for all the world, "We will never lose our pride."

We press forward, setting foot onto the bridge. There are no streetlamps here, but the faces of the heroes are still clearly visible in the shining moonlight. The statues are placed at uniform intervals along the railing on either side of the bridge. They are the thirty-one heroes who had accomplished the most impressive feats of all the heroes who had fought in Orario.

They are not ordered by year of death or anything recognizable. There are people from different times scattered all around. The knight Hulrand is there. As is Saruon, descendant of the wolfen emperor. And the Amazon empress Ivelda. The undead count Galzanef. Sidhu the supreme. Spirit Dynast Sphia. Even the high elf saint Seldia, a holy woman said to have been untouched by all forms of corruption...

Next to several of the heroes' statues are the great spirits who are said to have aided them in their accomplishments.

"The Bridge of Heroes...It's been awhile since I came here. Have you been here before, Bell?"

"Yes, many times...But it was always crowded when I came..."

"Yes. I've never seen it so quiet before..."

The bridge is located quite a ways away from the busy shopping district and Trading Post. It's far removed from the Main Streets and the clamor of the festival as well.

Viewed from the bridge, the sea of lights illuminating the rest of the city feels almost like a world apart.

We are all alone, the world around us silent as we stand amid heroes.

Neither of us speak as we continue forward, staring up at the figures until we reach the center of the bridge.

“...”

Here we stop in front of the hero standing there.

A single longsword. Light armor. A long scarf. There is no spirit by his side.

I look up at the face of the man hailed as the strongest hero in the long history of heroes.

“Albert the Great...”

I stare at the features of the hero who I had started researching six days ago, looking for some connection with Aiz.

Albert the Great’s feat was synonymous with the end of the ancient era. His death marked the beginning of the age of deities. His legend is indestructible, spoken of in the final chapter of the *Dungeon Oratoria*.

His achievement was driving back the Black Dragon.

The pitch-black calamity birthed from the great pit had seemed intent on destroying every person—every last thing in the land. And, fighting alone, Albert drove it away—at the cost of his life. After he stole an eye from the King of Dragons with his sword, the now one-eyed dragon gave a piercing screech that rocked the world as it flew off to the lands far to the north. Whether in honor of what he had accomplished, or perhaps sensing danger to itself—though the true reason hardly matters now—the embodiment of destruction had left Orario behind.

And shortly after the Black Dragon was gone, the first of the deities descended to the mortal realm, raising the curtain on the age of the deities that was still ongoing.

In other words, Albert had brought the ancient era to an end, advancing the fate of the mortal realm to a new stage. And because of that, he’s recognized by everyone as the strongest hero. And yet...

...It isn’t here, either...

On the pedestal with Albert’s name, there is no trace of his other name—of the name Valdstejn.

Who were you? What connection do you have to Aiz?

The statue has no answer for me.

“Interested in the great hero?” Syr asks.

“Hmm? Ah, yes...there was something I had been trying to look

up about him..." I can't really explain it well when asked like that all of a sudden.

She studies me closely.

"Do you know why there isn't a statue across from Albert on the Bridge of Heroes?"

"Eh?"

When I follow her gaze, I suddenly realize she's right. There is a gap in the uniform spacing on the right side of the bridge. At the center, across from Albert's statue, is nothing besides empty space.

As if there isn't yet anyone worthy of facing him.

And just when I had that thought...

"The world wants a hero."

It almost sounds like someone else's voice.

"They wait for the final hero, the one who will finally save the Orario that Albert protected and this entire mortal realm along with it."

"The final...hero...?"

"When the final hero who defeats the ancient dragon takes their place in that empty space...only then will the Bridge of Heroes finally be complete."

Now I understand the meaning of the gap in front of the great hero. The counterpart to the hero who ended the ancient era and set the stage for the age of deities. The one qualified to stand before the greatest hero who protected the world can be none other than the one who fulfills his final wish—the final hero who saves the world.

That is surely the aspiration and greatest wish of everyone in the line of heroes stretching back to the very first: true peace. Overcoming the embodiment of destruction and thrusting the world into a brilliant future.

"The land of beginnings where the heroes fell...and the promised land where heroes are born."

My murmur fades into the breeze.

I ponder those words, the thoughts I had during Elegia.

After I stare at the statue for a while...

"Bell, do you think there are really heroes?"

Syr's question catches me off guard, and I turn to face her.

"Whenever I come here, I'm always filled with this mysterious feeling."

"...?"

"I always wonder if a hero truly exists. One who would help me no matter what and save me from everything...A hero who could grant me my wish..."

Walking barefoot, she cuts into my field of view and turns to face me.

"I want to meet Odr. An irreplaceable hero all my own."

"Odr...?"

Syr smiles as I murmur a word I hadn't ever heard before.

"Yes...An Odr all my own."

And even though it couldn't be, I can almost feel the loneliness hidden behind her smile.

"I always think how nice it would be if I could ever find him..."

Our gazes meet. Her blue-gray eyes are peering into mine. I suddenly find it hard to breathe. It's her eyes. They're practically pleading with me for something. I don't want to know what that something is. I desperately try to feign ignorance as my heart cries out.

I can't move my legs. I can't move forward or backward. Time stops for just the two of us.

I starts to move my lips, trying to force something out.

The wind blows, and then a cute sneeze echoes.

"A...are you okay?!"

"Yes...I've just gotten a little cold, I guess."

"Of course you're cold, you're drenched!"

I dash over to her.

I'm drenched, too, so I don't have any clothes to lend her. She's rubbing her arms, so I'm about to suggest we find a place to get changed when Syr notices something.

"Bell...hasn't it gotten noisy over there?"

"Eh?"

Looking where she is pointing and listening closely with my enhanced ears, I can definitely hear it.

—*Find Lady Syr!*

—*They can't have gone far!*

That has to be the voices of our pursuers!

"Agh...! L-let's get out of here!"

"Okay!"

We stayed too long on the Bridge of Heroes. At this rate, we'll be discovered. We can't afford to take it easy here any longer.

Taking Syr's hand, I start running across to the other side of the bridge.

"But where do we go...?"

Is there anywhere we could change out of our wet clothes and hide away from *Freya Familia*? Is there really a place like that nearby?

"Leave it to me!"

It's almost like she can read my troubled thoughts. Turning around, I see Syr's reliable smile.

"I have an idea!"

"Really?!"

“Yes!”

I put my faith in her and ask her to lead the way.

—Thinking back on it later, I realize her smile was unmistakably an impish grin.



Heading down the back alleys, Syr guides me to an inn.

“Huh?”

And then she asks for a single room.

“Wha...?”

And in that room, there is just the one bed.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-whaaaaa—?!”

She holds her finger to her lips and shushes me as I start to shout.

No, this is *not* the time for shushing!

Did I miss it because I was focusing too much on our pursuers? Or should I just curse my indecisiveness for trusting her and not saying anything sooner?

Either way, here we are, all alone together in an inn—

“We don’t have any other choice, right? If we kept running the way we have been, they would have caught us, and we were definitely going to catch a cold no matter what.”

“S-still...!”

“I thought it was a really good idea, myself. I doubt they would think we ducked into an inn, either.”

My eyes are practically bulging out of their sockets as she says it so matter-of-factly.

She led us to a merchant lodge on the periphery of the Trading Post. It normally serves as a place for traveling merchants to stay the night. Thinking about it from a more regular point of view, it definitely isn’t the sort of a place an adventurer or a regular city girl would ever use.

A man and woman drenched to the bone. It’s fairly obvious we’re in a strange predicament, but the dwarf proprietor still lent us the room without any hesitation. According to him, there’d be no end to it if you tried to count the number of people dealing with strange situations in the Labyrinth City.

The room is built from wood. It’s a simple construction, and there isn’t much in the way of furnishings beyond a magic-stone lamp on the lone table, but perhaps because it was intended for merchants, there is a small private shower room. And, of course, the single bed up against the wall.

I can’t contain my agitation at the imposing presence this piece of furniture has. Were there really no other options? I just feel

progressively more awkward until I notice Syr pointing out the window.

I can see people from *Freya Familia* clad in black through the gap in the curtains. They are running past shouting, “Find them!” and “They have to be around here!”

I swallow the cry welling up inside me as I slowly back away from the window.

There’s no choice but to accept the situation. A few more awkward moments pass before Syr speaks up.

“So then, what should we do?”

“What do you mean...?”

She’s standing nearby and looking at me over her shoulder. The bed is right there in front of us. It’s a plain bed. It would be a tight fit for both of us, but definitely not too small to share.

I glance back at her after staring blankly at the bed. Her small, vibrant lips part slightly. For some reason, the way she did that looked almost terrifyingly lascivious, even though that couldn’t possibly have been intentional.

A droplet of water falls from her soaked hair onto her dress. Drawn by that movement, my gaze drifts lower, and I notice that her underwear is clearly visible through her wet dress.

I turn intensely red.

“—P-please take a shower first!”

I turn away without even realizing it as I shout, my agitation clear as day in my voice.

I tried to say “I can wait, so please go ahead and warm yourself up,” but I couldn’t make my mouth obey my brain.

A beat later...

“Very well.”

Her presence moves away. I hear the door to the shower room open and close.

“.....”

The tension in my shoulders subsides ever so slightly.

But the audible rustling of clothes—and the sound of the shower coming on soon after—brings all of that tension rushing back. My mind goes completely blank.

“...A change of clothes. I have to get a change of clothes...”

My mind refuses to move beyond that thought.

Of course, I don’t have any spare clothes arranged in advance. Even if Syr warms up in the shower, it’d be pointless without dry clothes to change into. Am I just going to curl up under the covers with her naked as the day we were born?

Casting aside that foolish idea, I frantically run out of the room, not forgetting to lock the door behind me. Fortunately, this is a

merchant lodge, so the doors do have locks. The last little fragment of calm remaining in my head breathes a mental sigh of relief at that small mercy. If someone managed to get into the room now, I'd never forgive myself.

I head down to the counter silently. Even as I ring the bell, my focus is entirely on our room. If anyone tries to go near it, I've calculated it would be possible to get back within two seconds. I can do at least that much. I could become an animal—a supersonic rabbit.

Finally, I negotiate for some loaner clothes from the proprietor, and when he looks annoyed by the request, I put all the money I have in my pocket down on the counter. The dwarf just takes that and brings out a change of clothes for two people without saying a word.

Accepting the hemp garments, I dash back to the room. I unlock the door and immediately close it again after slipping inside. I can still hear the sound of the shower on the other side of the wall.

“.....”

I set the changes of clothes on the bed and then sit down in the chair even though I'm still wet. It feels like my body has been completely drained of strength. It didn't even take three minutes, but I feel more tired now than at any other point during the day. I naturally lean forward in the chair, my back to the shower door as I clasp my hands and look at the floor. I can't do anything but look at the floor.

I am going to have to come to terms with the situation I'm currently in before long.

“Spending the night here...? With Syr...?”

Blood starts rushing to my head all of a sudden.

Is that really necessary? Couldn't I just wait for her to get out and get changed and then say good-bye before heading out by myself?

I consider that option for a moment, but for some reason I feel certain that if I did that, Master would actually roast me to death. We're talking about Master, after all.

How long is the Goddess Festival date in effect anyway? Can I really just abandon Syr like that? Can I really disrespect her feelings when she's shown me a smile she's never revealed before? And it's a bit too late to realize this now, but will *Hestia Familia* and I even have a future anymore after I spirited away someone under *Freya Familia*'s protection? Is there any point in running anymore?

“I mean, today is the harvest festival, right? Mother Maria said that today is the day of the year when the most couples are blessed with children!”

Fina's innocent voice suddenly bubbles up in my head.

Stop it. No more weird thoughts. Don't make me think about it. I don't need any weird foreshadowing, please...

My mind spins aimlessly, even though this is hardly the time for

idle daydreams. I just can't seem to focus. Utterly confused, I can do nothing more than seek guidance from my elders in life.

What would Master—and Gramps, who raised me—say in this situation?

What should I do?!

“If she brought you to an inn, then simply go with the flow. Or rather, let her have her way with you.”

What was that correction?!

“Bell, my boy, just keep sprinting until you reach the next stage of adulthood! Fan the flames of passion and charge forward!!!”

Dammit, Gramps!

This is useless. There isn't anything I can rely on. That definitely sounded like something the two of them would say, but I'm still at my wit's end.

A-anyway! I can't dwell on it!

Just because I decided I couldn't afford to be forever dense about things like that after the incident with Haruhime doesn't mean I should let my imagination run wild now! And besides, there's no way Syr has any ulterior motives!

In order to come back to my senses, I began to list the names of monsters in the Dungeon.

Goblins, kobolds, jack birds, woe shadows, dungeon lizards, killer ants, needle rabbits, orcs, imps, minotaurs, minotaurs, minotaursminotaursminotaursminotaursminotaursminotaurs!

And then, the shower stops.

“Guh?!”

I twitch, half sitting as I turn around...

Creeeeek.

The shower door opens ever so slightly.

“Bell...do you have a change of clothes?”

I'm surprised for a moment before bundling up the clothes on the bed and dashing over to put them into the wet hands reaching out from behind the door.

And the moment I give them to her, I see her blue-gray eyes through the gap. And also a glimpse of her collarbone and her smooth, flushed skin. I step back silently and turn away from the door. It should go without saying what color my face is right now.

I can't bring myself to move, and after a short while, Syr steps out.

“The shower's free now.”

“...O-okay. Thank you.”

My eyes are glued to the floor. I can't bring myself to meet her gaze as I move past her and into the shower room. The modest stone flooring has water splashed all around it, and the towel she had just used is neatly folded up. The wet clothes she had taken off are

nowhere to be seen.

I lay my soaking clothes on the floor.

A twist of the valve severs the connection to the water heater and then I set the pressure to full blast. The water sprays over my head.

“...It’s not like I’m trying to do anything...”

I murmur, trying to convince myself as the shower rains down on me.

Instead of a hot shower, I let cold water wash over me in an attempt to calm my heart.

I sort of feel like I’ve been set up, and I definitely lost my cool earlier, but I just need to remember this isn’t anything to worry about. It’s nothing more than unavoidable emergency measures. That’s right. I’m going to end up staying out overnight without permission, but I’ll simply have to beg the goddess for forgiveness tomorrow.

I can let Syr take the bed and sleep on the floor. Sleeping on the floor would be practically paradise compared to the thirty-seventh floor of the Dungeon.

—That’s what I thought at least.

“...”

After wiping myself down and getting dressed, I open the door.

Syr looks up from her perch on the edge of the bed.

She isn’t wearing anything other than the shirt. Just a single baggy top buttoned up in the front.

Her soft thighs and slender legs are bare beneath the hem.

And I’m sure she isn’t wearing any underwear, either.

I come really close to fainting on the spot.

“...What happened to your clothes?”

“I couldn’t wear the pants. They’re too baggy and keep falling down.”

My first assumption is that she’s lying, but then I notice.

In my flustered rush, I had handed her the larger set of clothes. The outfit I am currently wearing is the women’s-sized set. All I can do is feel bitter about the fact that they fit so well and desperately curse my idiocy for making such a careless mistake.

Syr’s let her hair down. Normally, she wears it up, but with no restraints, it streams freely down her back.

Surprised by how long and alluring it is, my heart starts running wild. She almost looks like a totally different person, or maybe this is Syr’s natural self. I can’t breathe.

“...I’ll sleep on the floor, so you can take the bed...”

“That’s no good. Let’s sleep together?”

“...I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“...Because I can’t do it.”

“No matter what?”

“...My goddess would be mad at me.”

“But I might die from the guilt if I made you sleep on the floor.”

“...Liar...”

Honestly, I can't even follow the conversation we're having anymore. I'm standing still while she's sitting on the bed. There's only a halfhearted gap between us as I look down and she looks up.

“How about having a seat?”

She asks kindly, worrying after seeing me stand there motionlessly.

I glance over at the chair. Her wet dress is laid out over it to dry. I can't use that.

Giving in, I sit down next to her. But I leave an unnaturally large space between us.

“You aren't going to do anything?”

My heart skips a beat.

“...I-I'm not sure what you are talking about...”

I play dumb as my voice trembles.

A new quiet falls over the room.

The festival is still going outside. People laughing, music playing, fireworks going off—all of it can be heard faintly in the background. The celebrations in the distance sound lovely.

At this very moment, though, I am terrified of how conscious I am that Syr is a woman. For some reason, it feels like a part of me might be changed forever. As if I'll lose the right to have feelings for someone else ever again.

“...Why...?” After managing to get that much out, I hesitate before trying to put it into words again. “...Why did you ask me out on a date?”

I did it. I asked something that I shouldn't have. Even though there obviously couldn't be any other reason for a date like this. Out of desperation, I grasp in the dark for some other reason, anything to keep me afloat. But before I have the chance to berate myself for asking something so awful, Syr answers.

“Because I wanted to let you know that I love you.”

“Eh?”

“I wanted to show just how much I love you.”

She shakes her head slightly and then continues softly.

“I wanted to prove it.”

Before I can express my shock, the bed creaks. Looking up in alarm, I find Syr directly in front of my face—right before she pushes me down onto the mattress.

For a second all I can see is the ceiling. The moment I realize what happened, I reflexively try to sit back up, but she has already gently

placed her hands on my shoulders, pinning me down. They are even trembling slightly, but right now, her hands feel heavier than anything I have ever known.

I prop myself up slightly on my elbows, eyes wide as the bed creaks again, louder than before. She pulls herself even closer, hovering right over me.

“I wanted...to prove it.”

Her voice is faint, and her eyes quiver as she places a hand on my cheek. Her face is barely a hairbreadth away. I might accidentally touch her with the slightest move.

“This isn’t love, i—”

The world falls away as her tiny lips draw close to mine, as if to keep me from finishing. Maybe she herself doesn’t realize what she’s doing.

That moment, a *golden light* flashes through my mind.

“—No!”

I grasp her by the shoulders, using just my abs to sit up and push her away from me.

I can’t just go with the flow. I can’t let this just happen to me. I can’t give up on my dream.

If I don’t stop this, we’ll both end up suffering. Making that mistake now would surely destroy us both someday. It would end in tears.

I gather my resolve to do what’s needed, even if it means she’ll never forgive me. It doesn’t matter how much I’m hated for it.

My face twists up with the realization that I’m about to hurt her right here and now, but I force myself to stop her.

“...”

Her hair flutters, covering her eyes. She falls back, sitting atop my legs, looking down quietly.

He hair hides her expression. There is a moment of silence that seems to last an eternity.

She lifts her head.

“Don’t refuse me.”

There’s a silver gleam to her blue-gray eyes.

“Accept me.”

The moment I see that glimmer up close, my body convulses like it’s breaking down.

No. *My heartbeat is running wild.*

My body is trying to surrender to that flash of silver, as if it’s an

irresistible force of nature.

I freeze, my breath leaving me as her face approaches mine again. She places both hands on my chest, trying to verify () with her lips. But the hieroglyphs etched into my back start to burn, as if trying to resist.

No matter how much my body longs to submit, that yearning refuses to fade.

My heart aches and my eyes warp as I murmur one word:

“—Syr...”

Pleading with her.

She shudders, like a bolt of lightning just hit her.

It looks like she reacted to that name. Or maybe it's because she saw her reflection in my eyes.

She suddenly draws back. The silver gleam in her eyes fades and she looks dumbfounded, wrapping her arms around herself as if even she can't believe what she had just done.

“No, that's not right...this isn't like Syr...”

She is murmuring something. And then she moves farther from me and turns away.

“...S...Syr...?”

“Look away.”

“Eh?”

“Please don't look at me.

“...Please.”

Her voice is barely audible.

I glance at her back for a moment longer before turning away like she asked. I huddle against my knees and curl up on top of the bed. The sounds of the festival are still audible. But now it almost feels like the world outside is laughing at us.

I don't know how much time passes after that.

“...Bell.” Syr slowly, gently breaks the silence.

“...Yes?”

“I promise I won't do anything you don't want me to. So could we please sleep together?”

Turning off the lamp, darkness fills the room.

Flickering light from outside filters in through the window and past the curtains, giving off a soft glow.

The two of us are lying on the small bed with our backs to each other.

I can't sleep, obviously. Syr is literally right next to me. Her warmth is immediately to my side. I can basically sense her breathing and feel her heartbeat without even trying.

“Bell.”

“...Yes?”

“Do you hate me now?”

“...No. I could never hate you.”

Even though I can't figure out why, it feels like I've just said something incredibly cruel.

“Do you not want to have a lover?”

“Where did that come from?!”

“You know, the children at the orphanage want a mother and father.”

“That doesn't answer the question!!”

The mood is shattered in an instant.

What was I feeling bad about before?! You haven't reflected on what you did at all!

As I shout both internally and out loud, I hear her rolling over. And then I feel her arm slip around my body. Syr presses her forehead against my back as I tense up reflexively.

“Don't look over here yet.”

I had started to turn to face her, but she stops me before I get very far. All I can do is shiver as she wraps her arms around my stomach and presses her body up against mine.

“S-Syr! You said you wouldn't—”

“But I'm cold.”

Sure enough, the parts of her arms I can feel are definitely cold.

“S-still...!”

Even so, though, I try to break free of the embrace, but I can sense her pouting lips up against my back.

“Even though you held Lyu.”

“Ugh...?!”

The sort of groan every person ever caught doing something utters slips from my lips.

“L-Lyu...told you...?”

“No, no one told me anything. You just did, though. She's also been behaving oddly ever since returning from the Dungeon.”

A troubled smile crosses my lips. I'm disappointed in myself for taking the bait so easily.

“Even though Lyu is a precious friend of mine...you did something lewd with her.”

“I—I did nothing of the sort! It was maybe b-borderline risqué...! But I didn't do anything weird!”

“Really?”

“Yes!”

“Then you won't do anything with me, either?”

“I—I would never!”

“Why not?”

What do you mean *why not*...?

I'm at a loss for how to respond. After a few moments collecting my thoughts...

"Because you're...you...I can't."

There's no way that would be an acceptable answer. Syr's arms squeeze tightly around my body.

"Stupid Bell."

"Wh-what...?"

"Stupid, stupid, stupid."

She presses her forehead against my back, shaking her head back and forth as she keeps berating me.

With no idea what I should do to make things better, I just let her keep going. I can't do anything other than continue to rest my head on my arm and stare at the wall next to the bed.

"Stupid..."

Her voice dies down to a prolonged sigh that seeps into my back. It is almost childlike.

I saw many new sides to Syr today. And learned so many things about her that I had never known before...

My heart has been racing since earlier, and I still can't get it under control, but while it might be a bit mean, I am absolutely relieved that the mood from before has faded.

I'm glad that we can get through this without something between us changing irrevocably.

—And I make no effort to consider just how awful a thought that might have been.

"Syr...Why...why did you...?"

Haltingly, struggling to find the right words, I try to get at the same question as before.

Still pressing her head against my back, she slowly responds.

"Because I thought...if I was the same as the others...if I was the same as Lyu and them...that wouldn't be enough."

"The same...? What do you mean?"

"It's something a child like you would never understand."

She says it a little forcefully, as if pushing me away. But after a few moments, she murmurs...

"...I don't even understand it myself..."

"Eh?"

"Why am I so desperate?"

"Desperate...?"

"Yes. Madly hanging on out of fear I'll let it slip through my fingers...desperately wishing and clawing..."

Soft, fragmented words fill the silence, running into my back. It is almost like a lullaby, one not meant for me, but for Syr herself...

*“Ahhh, that’s it.
“That’s why I—”*

Her soft whispers fade away at last. I can feel her eyelids closing against my back. It doesn’t sound like she is asleep yet, but I can tell that she wouldn’t be opening her eyes for me again tonight.

Looking down at the slender arms embracing me, feeling her warmth against my back, I slowly close my eyes as well.

I am exhausted. In a certain sense, this day has been more tiring than venturing into the Dungeon.

And so I gradually drift off to sleep in her embrace.



The soft, regular sounds of quiet slumber fill the room

After the hour hand had made two trips around the clock, Syr slowly opened her eyes. She gently untangled her arms, careful not to wake him as she sat up in bed.

He must have been enduring extraordinary fatigue, because he did not notice Syr sitting up at all. Or perhaps it was because he instinctively trusted her, believed in her promise.

His innocent face as he slept there was both lovely and painful to look at, but she could not bring herself to touch either hair or cheek with her outstretched hand.

“...”

Moonlight shone through the window.

The faint glimmer almost seemed like an announcement that midnight had arrived. But there was no carriage to pick her up.

Syr looked down at his face one last time and whispered softly:

“Tomorrow, if we meet again...I’ll...”

Only the light of the moon heard the rest.

She silently left the bed, slipped into her dress that had not finished drying yet, and once she was ready, she left the room.

She did not turn to look back.

MONOLOGUE V



MONOLOGUE V



Love is a cruel thing.

Unrequited love is considered a virtue. But I know to my core just how truly brutal such a one-sided love could be.

Because the object of that love would never reciprocate. It would never be rewarded. Passion or lust were the only ways to maintain their attention.

But if the one you loved was kind enough to realize that accepting that passion and answering that lust would only hurt the both of you in the future...If the one you loved could not bring themselves to simply accept it...If the one you loved possessed an unclouded heart that did not wallow in desire...If the one you loved never lost themselves...

Then what was there to do?

It would be simple enough to laugh it off as the act of a child. But the older and longer-lived you become, the more you realize how difficult that choice truly is. How hard that is to come by.

Compassion is a poison. Rapture is toxic. And for anyone who would give in out of sympathy, the relationship would become a cross that both of you would bear until it ended in pain and suffering for all.

With the pure longing he held in his heart, he would surely never waver. If he were to ever be corrupted, it would be by force alone. His clumsy, high-minded way of living would never submit. And if he were to be tainted, he might very well continue to push onward regardless, never giving up on his desires, even as he bore the stain on his heart.

When faced with someone like that, how would you gain his heart?

I do not have an answer.

Love is—he is—cruel.

But even so, or rather precisely because of that, I am grateful to him—and I despise him.

Because your sublime way of living is driving even a goddess mad.

Fragment

Syr's Origin



© Suzuhito Yasuda

FRAGMENT

SYR'S ORIGIN

Snow was falling.

Beautiful, merciless white shards fell from the heavens, gathering around a frozen body. It was alone. Cold. There were none who would embrace it. None who would relieve its hunger.

Its gradually freezing arms and legs were an inevitable reality. Its filthy body an inescapable fact.

Why am I so filthy, so poor, so empty, so cold? The same questions flitted through my ashen heart for the thousandth time only to disappear again.

As my consciousness faded, I pondered seriously what to do to make my body not my own anymore. And as I pondered it, I decided to stop living.

That was when it happened.

“—Are you okay?”

A soothing soprano voice rang in my ears.

It wrenched open the eyelids that were on the verge of closing, and the moment I saw *her*, my eyes opened wide.

A being more beautiful, more blessed, more fulfilled, more warm than anyone I had ever seen was standing right there.

It was the first time I had learned that sort of being could exist in this world.

“I was thinking of helping you, but...is there anything you desire?”

She posed the question as if she merely wanted to amuse herself. Or perhaps it was to catch the glimmer of a wish hidden deep within myself.

There is. Of course there is.

Realizing that there could be a being so beautiful, so blessed, so fulfilled, so warm, there was just one feeling in my heart. It was not envy or yearning or jealousy—it was an insatiable craving.

I want to become you. I want to stop being me and become clean, warm. I want to become you.

She surely had not expected to hear that. She gazed in wonder

before laughing aloud.

“You want to become me? How ravenous can you be?! There has never been a child who asked for that before!”

There were those who had been saved by her love. And those who had sworn fealty to her as well. But there had never been a person who had wanted to become her.

She found this highly amusing. The silver-haired goddess continued to laugh, as if it was so funny that she could not help it. As if it had piqued her interest.

“Then I shall give you _____. In exchange, you will give me _____, yes?”

I nodded weakly.

And then, in that irredeemable slum, the goddess reached her hand out and asked:

“What is your name?”

My lips trembled.

“—Syr.”



That was an exchange of fates. From that moment on, my destiny was set in stone. But even so, I did not mind. As long as I could be set free from that frozen town. As long as I could be unshackled from that solitude and darkness. As long as I could become the being who was more beautiful, more blessed, more fulfilled, and more warm than anyone else.

And so, I changed.

—I was reborn as a goddess.



CHAPTER 6

THE WISH'S COST

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THE WISH'S COST

I can tell I'm waking from a deep sleep.

Opening my eyes, an unfamiliar wooden wall and a window covered by cheap curtains greet me. The unfamiliar scent of the building is a vivid reminder of where I spent the night.

"It's morning...Guh?"

And also who I spent it with.

"Syr?"

Only then do I finally realize that I am alone in bed.

The person who was supposed to have been there beside me is gone. Sitting up to look around, I see that her clothes that had been set out on the chair are gone as well. She isn't in the shower, either. Did she leave on her own? Even if I was exhausted, how out of it was I to have not even noticed?

And why?

Does she actually hate me after everything that happened?

The other possibility that comes to mind...is that *Freya Familia* has taken her away.

I shudder at the thought. It's incredibly unlikely, since I'm obviously still alive and well. But maybe she had protected me...?

Even I can tell my imagination is just running wild at this point, and I can't stand around thinking about it forever. I quickly get dressed, grimacing at the unpleasant dampness of the half-dried clothes.

"...!"

I pause for a moment in my hurried rush to leave.

There is a single item on top of the table. A silver accessory with blue decorations—one half of the matching pair. I stare at it for a moment before slipping it into my pocket and running out of the room.

"Syr! Where are you...?"

I ask the dwarf on the first floor, but he doesn't know where she went, either. And she didn't leave a message for me.

I exit the inn.

Ashen clouds form a solid wall above. Unfortunately, the weather

changed, and the second day of the festival will be happening under overcast skies.

Those are heavy clouds. What a troublesome color. It might rain later.

I start sprinting, quickly speeding up. I look everywhere as I retrace our path from last night in my head.

The Bridge of Heroes, coming ashore, the waterway cruise. It has been through some rough sailing, but I spot Spoon Aqua safely docked at its pier. After we left, *Freya Familia* and everyone else had no more reason to continue fighting, so the night had ended without too major an incident, I guess. I find an employee who had been there last night and try asking if he had seen Syr, but he doesn't know anything, either. He does hand me the trunk I had forgotten last night, though. The magic items inside are all safe and sound. I thank him before continuing my search.

Unsurprisingly, I make very little headway running around aimlessly.

"Did she go back to The Benevolent Mistress...?"

I cling to that possibility as I angle toward West Main Street, even though I don't really believe it.

It's early morning, but the taverns are still packed with patrons who have been partying through the night, and there are noticeably more people out on the street than usual. The festive mood has not faded at all even with the dawn of a new day.

Coming out on West Main Street, I see Welf dressed as a waiter, looking exhausted as he heads toward The Benevolent Mistress.

"Welf!"

"Hmm?" He turns around. "Wait, Bell?! Where the hell did you go yesterday?!"

He looks around frantically before running over to me.

"We were worried when you didn't make it back...So did you spend the night with her last night? It was a pain in the ass to stop Li'l E from dashing out once she started shouting. And then I had to look after our fox, who just straight-up fainted..."

He seems almost scared of what might happen if Lilly finds out I'm here, but I cut him off.

"I'm really sorry! But did Syr come back here?! She disappeared, and I can't find her!"

He blinks several times, and seeing how flustered I am, his expression turns serious.

"Just calm down. Let's head over there, and I'll listen to what happened."

In the narrow alley next to The Benevolent Mistress, Welf leans

against the wall as I outline what had happened last night and this morning.

"You were chased by *Freya Familia*, and when you woke up, she was gone. Huh..."

"Mm-hmm. I'm worried that they might have taken her away somewhere..." I can't shake my unease.

Welf unfolds his arms.

"Sorry, Bell, but I need to ask something first."

"Eh?"

He looks me straight in the eyes.

"What are you going to do if you find her?"

At first, I don't know what he means.

"What do you...?"

"It's not like I'm a genius when it comes to the finer points of understanding women...but there's no mistaking that that girl likes you."

"...!"

"And not as a friend. As a man."

I gulp as Welf's expression hardens and his tone grows fierce.

"So tell me now, what are you going to do after you find her? Are you going to play dumb and just try to make everything go back to normal? Even I know it's cruel to not respond to her feelings."

"...H-how could...someone like me...?"

"How could she fall in love with someone like you? Are you really going to give me that?"

Welf refuses to let me run away from reality. His eyes are clearly saying, "You've already realized it yourself, haven't you?"

"If you're going to play dumb about it after everything that's happened, then you're definitely not the man I thought you were."

My eyes flicker. I'm not blaming him, but it does feel like he's pummeling my heart with a battering ram.

...Of course I noticed.

I kept telling myself to not be conceited...that it would be unbearably embarrassing if it was all just a misunderstanding on my part. I did my best to convince myself and to lie to myself about it. But I had been hazily aware of it during the date yesterday, and then unmistakably later that night. I had learned how she truly felt. I heard her say that she loves me.

There's no way to let it stay vague and ambiguous anymore.

I have nothing to say as I look down.

"It's not a bad thing to be humble. And I can understand stopping dead in the water because you aren't sure of yourself. But...don't lie to yourself. And don't leave her hanging like that."

"..."

“The most obvious reason for her being gone in the morning is that she’s given up on you.”

It’s pathetic, but I can’t even respond. And having said that much, Welf slowly sighs.

“...If you’re like this now, it’s gonna be rough for all the people who fall for you.”

“Eh?!”

I look up suddenly to see Welf covering his mouth as if he had let something slip.

“Ah, no, I just meant with you being a top-tier adventurer now, there will be a lot of people who will be interested in you, is all. Don’t overthink it.”

He grins awkwardly, trying to backpedal.

“Now listen, I’m not saying you should get full of yourself instead. And if anything, I think it’s more arrogant to expect someone to notice your feelings without ever trying to tell them how you feel yourself. As a guy, I definitely think there’s some responsibility on the woman’s side, too.”

“...”

“But once someone has come out and confessed their feelings... don’t you dare even think about running away. Besides, I want my partner to do things right. That’s just my selfish opinion, though.”

Welf grins. Shame wells up inside me. The advice from our familia’s older-brother figure echoes loudly in my heart.

“I...”

If. If a time comes when I have to give my answer, it will be—

“...Made up your mind?”

“...Yep. I won’t run away.”

“Then I won’t say any more. Sorry for bringing it up.”

“No...I’m sorry, Welf. And thank you...” I respond weakly.

He just smiles. Welf really does feel like an older brother.

Then he quickly changes tack, saying, “Back to the original topic.

“I don’t know where she went, but you’re sure she’s got some connection with *Freya Familia*, right? In that case, there’s nothing to do but contact them, right?”

“You mean go straight to *Freya Familia*...?”

“Yeah, I doubt a single girl all on her own could really avoid a swarm of upper-tier adventurers who are intent on finding her.”

Welf is thinking along the same lines I had been. It’s weird to call it protection under these circumstances, but odds are high that they have already caught Syr. If so, then asking them directly would probably be the fastest way to find out.

“You don’t have to worry about causing problems for us by carelessly approaching them. Even in the worst case, I’m sure it won’t

spill over into a full-on conflict...Probably.”

“Y-yeah. Probably...”

“I’d love to help you, but...sorry, I don’t think any of us are going to be able to get away today. We’ve got forced labor to deal with here...”

“F-forced labor?”

“We got the rough end of the stick because that merry band ditched their shifts. And there’s no escaping that dwarf’s eyes... Seriously...”

Apparently, Welf and the others had been forced to keep working at the tavern. Mia had said they would be taking the place of the girls who had run away.

Which explains why he looks so absolutely worn out.

Oh right, Lyu and the girls were on Spoon Aqua...Had they been tailing us?

“Did they not come back?”

“Nope. And our goddess didn’t, either,” Welf says with a shrug.

I nod.

In any case, my options are limited, so I have no choice but to try everything I can. I leave my trunk with Welf and get ready to go. But after a step, I turn around.

“Thank you, Welf! I’ll be back soon!”

“Yeah, go get ’em.”

I say my thanks one last time and dash out of the alley.

“Just when I thought he had grown as an adventurer, he’s still just a kid when it comes to this stuff, huh...?”

His partner had started to look different after the incident with the Xenos, but when it came to things other than adventuring, he still acted very much his age. If anything, he was too pure.

“But that’s not so bad,” Welf murmured with a laugh. Then his expression darkened.

“An employee of hers being guarded by *Freya Familia*...Does that dwarf maybe know?”

He even began to wonder if this tavern was under the patronage of the goddess of beauty...?

Staring up at The Benevolent Mistress’s signage out front, Welf was quickly closing in on the truth.



I run through West Main Street, weaving my way through the crowd.

There are lots of people from the Guild lining the festively decorated street. Most of them are busy refilling the wooden crates

that had been emptied the previous day with more food and flowers from the harvest, and the lines of stands are similarly getting ready for business.

While taking stock of the morning preparations going on out of the corner of my eye, I think about how I should make contact with *Freya Familia*. That's when suddenly I notice something.

"No one's watching me...?"

I can't sense any of the vigilant eyes that had been boring holes in me all throughout my date with Syr yesterday. Had they simply lost track of us after we stayed the night at the inn, or are they keeping track of me using a different method now?

Is it possible they've stopped following me entirely?

Making contact with Master...with Hedin would be ideal, but—

—No, *there is someone*.

Just one person. Whoever it is, they're still keeping an eye on me while hiding their presence frighteningly well. Unfortunately for them, I'm especially sensitive to other people's gazes.

I stop for a moment—and the next instant start sprinting at full speed. I turn down an alleyway and head for the building where I know my watcher is standing.

Sprinting to not give them any time to hide, I leap up, kicking off the wall opposite it, and land on the building's roof.

"...!"

The watcher makes no effort to run or hide. It's a single dark elf, his jet-black cloak swaying in the wind.

One of *Freya Familia*'s first-tier adventurers. Someone who stands on the same level as Hedin. Realizing that, I gulp.

...But...huh?

It feels like he's intentionally not facing me for some strange reason...?

"A white brute has come calling beneath the ashen heavens? The winds raise their lamentations."

Huh...?

"Why do you tarry here, O unwelcome visitor? This morn's heavens are in a foul mood. If you wish not to be drawn into the mad frenzy, then begone posthaste."

I seriously can't understand what he's saying at all, but...?

The way the wind rustles his cloak makes him look aloof and proud. From behind, he looks incredibly cool. But for some reason—I can't say why exactly—he has this distinct smell...

Is he...?

"Umm...Are you the one the deities call the, uh, Sick Edge Lord?"

The moment that title crosses my lips, the dark elf—*Freya Familia*'s first-tier adventurer Hegni Ragnar—whirls around to face

me.

“Bite thy tongue! Address me not by that abhorrent title!”

He has an almost painfully well-proportioned face, though his green eyes are already filling with tears.

“Mine form is haunted by no affliction! Nor have I been afflicted by a divine plague...!”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

—“Uuugggghhhh, just quit it, please! Don’t look at me like that. And don’t call me that name! I don’t know what it means, but it feels like everyone’s making fun of me when they call me thaaaaaaat...”

“.....M-my apologies...”

“I can’t deal with people I’ve never met before! I just can’t! It’s so embarrassing, I want to die.....Ghhhh, my pitch-black persona just crumbles away...!”

Uhhh, yeah...I feel like I understand what the deities mean when they talk about *revealing your true character* now.

Hegni is even more socially awkward than Aiz, and he seems to be incredibly nervous by nature. The way he talks and acts just exacerbates the problem...

Oh yeah, when I had asked Hedin about the other first-tier adventurers in his familia out of curiosity, he wouldn’t tell me anything about anyone, but he did say something like “*Hegni is just a fool*”...

“...U-ummm...Do you by any chance know where Syr went?” I ask, feeling guilty as I watch him wipe his eyes.

His face hardens, and the imposing presence from earlier returns.

“...We art in search of the sacred princess ourselves.”

“Y-you are?”

“The multitude of followers have unfettered thee from thy prison and are earnestly pursuing more joyful tidings. In this great capital, verily like a whirlwind. Mine fate is to become the eternal chains punishing the hare should the worst come to pass...for mine name is Alv.”

I—I still can’t really understand what he is actually saying, but I think I got the gist. Gramps used to run his mouth sort of like that sometimes way back when, too!

It sounds like almost everyone else in *Freya Familia* has decided to leave me alone and is now frantically searching for Syr, who has disappeared somewhere. And Hegni is continuing to track me just in case he needs to know where to find me. Or something along those lines.

Which means *Freya Familia* has lost track of Syr, too...

Where could she have gone?

Something almost like an impatient unease starts to well up inside

me. And, as if he can sense that, Hegni, who had been watching me blankly, all of a sudden focuses his gaze directly on me.

“Did you gain resplendent, eternal memories...reminiscences that will never fade?”

“Huh?”

“There will be no time for a sorrowful parting. Therefore I am asking if you have completed your farewells.”

For a moment I actually have no idea what he’s saying. It doesn’t make any sense at all, but I start reacting to the words echoing in my ears.

“Reminiscences...? Parting? What does that all mean?!”

“The girl has called upon you—not the goddess. No matter thy decision, the fate that awaits shall remain unaltered. My foresight has revealed as much to me...At the very least, that is how I see it.”

Like every other time, I can’t really grasp what he’s trying to tell me. Interpreting or even guessing is impossible here. It just doesn’t make any sense.

But I am badly shaken by the fact that it almost sounded like he said “she will disappear.”

“What happened to Syr?! Is something going to happen to her?!” In my alarm, I unconsciously approach Hegni.

“Eeeep?! D-d-d-d-don’t get any closer!! If you get that close...the eyes! Ah! I can’t do it! Run away!”

Hegni recoils in fear and leaps down from the roof.

“Hnn?! W-wait!”

I run to the railing and hop down into the back alley I saw his fluttering black cape slip past.

Syr is going to disappear? Farewell? What does that mean?! What are you talking about?!

I desperately chase after him the moment I hit the ground. Following the cloak flickering in and out of view at the edge of my vision, I barrel through the web of complex intersections, at times asking passersby if they’ve seen a dark elf.

But he is unmistakably a first-tier adventurer. He has no trouble throwing me off his trail, and I quickly lose sight of him.

“Haaah, haaah...! Where’d he...?!”

I find myself at Central Park. The center of the city is already filled to the brim with people. Unaware of what’s transpiring, the revelers are simply preparing to enjoy the second day of the festival.

Did he blend into the crowd? Or is he not even in the plaza at all?

My unease grows as I frantically scan my surroundings—and then I see the altars. The towers of plenty. The four stone stages constructed to honor the goddesses who symbolize this festival and the harvest season.

Without even thinking about it, I look to the pillar in the north where I had seen Freya yesterday.

“_____”

My gaze is met by a lone boaz. The warrior with a form that seems like it was chiseled from a boulder. The city’s strongest adventurer.

He stares down at me with his silent gaze, and right when I start to feel like he might have been waiting for me, he slowly lifts his enormous arm. His finger pointing to the city’s northeast.

“Ghh...?!”

I don’t know his intent or the real meaning behind the gesture. But it feels like he’s telling me to go there.

I stand in shock for a moment before looking in that direction. Not long after, I turn on my heels. Like a ship guided by a lighthouse in the distance—or more like a boat that had no choice but to cling to the hope the lighthouse will guide me to safety.

I’m not sure this is the right choice at all. I am uneasy. But even so, I have no choice but to trust my instincts.

Slipping through the crowds, I leave Central Park, following my new lead.

The city’s northeast is the industrial district, where much of the magic-stone-item manufacturing takes place. It is a place where craftsmen and workers fill the streets, but a festive mood has taken root here, too.

After changing direction several times because of all the turns, I approach the center of the industrial area. And then...

“—Syr!”

I spot her.

She’s at an abandoned stagecoach stop. Sitting on a bench in the small, dilapidated gazebo. The waiting area is desolate and dirty, hidden behind dead angles from the buildings around it. If you aren’t looking for it, it would be an easy place to miss, which is probably why it has been forgotten and unmaintained.

“...! Bell!”

She starts in surprise when she hears my voice and jumps to her feet. She seems almost overcome with emotion, as if her wish has finally come true.

“—?”

Her damp, blue-gray eyes. The way she presses her hand against her chest. The weak smile that seems like it might shatter into countless shards at any moment.

Seeing her like this makes me nervous. She looks like she might break into tears, but the emotion in her eyes is—

“...I’m so happy that we could meet again. That you found me.”

“...What do you mean?”

“...I’m sorry, please just pretend you didn’t hear that.”

There’s no way I can do that.

I still don’t understand what’s going on. As I start walking over, she suddenly starts looking around.

I can’t explain why, but when I see her face from the side like this, it feels like I am getting a glimpse of the determination to break an oath.

She focuses on a point in the distance and purses her lips, as if resolving herself.

“Please come with me, Bell.”

“Eh? U-um?!”

“I want to get away from here...or rather, there’s a place I would like to go to.”

She takes my hand and tugs. She doesn’t let me say anything or even seem to be listening to me. Her blue-gray hair flutters, and she brings her eyes around to meet mine as she flashes a smile.

“Since you so kindly brought me to the places you wanted to go yesterday, could we please go someplace I want today?”

—Please, Bell.”

The way she asks makes it seem like this is a once-in-a-lifetime request.



When the various people living in Orario looked up and saw the ashen clouds blotting out the sky above, they all had the same thought: It looked like it might rain.

Some were disappointed, some lamented the weather, and some resolved themselves to enjoy the festival as much as possible before the rain started. The reactions were as varied as the people making them.

“...Syr and Bell...couldn’t find them anywhere...didn’t return... Did they spend the night together?...All night long?...That can’t be... They aren’t even married yet...”

And amid those people, there was one person who had fallen into despair—Lyu.

She was on North Main Street. Unable to find Bell or Syr after the incident on the boat, she greeted the new day with an unbelievably pale face. She had spent the entire night searching everywhere for the two of them.

She murmured hollowly, driven by elven nature that was dedicated to propriety and a sense of virtue.

“Lyu! Don’t break down in the middle of the street! Everyone’s

staring at us!”

Chloe dragged Lyu away from where she had been standing still in the center of a crowd trying to pass by, looking like she had seen the end of the world. As she desperately tried to revive the elf, she muttered to herself, “Runoa’s the one who’s supposed to handle this kind of stuff, meow!”

“Heeey! We found them! Ahnya caught the kiddo’s scent!” Runoa’s voice boomed, completely unconcerned about drawing even more attention.

“Really?! Great job, you two!” Chloe rejoiced. “Did mew hear that, Lyu? Let’s hurry up and follow them!”

“They haven’t even exchanged vows in the forest...or even before a deity, if not the forest...”

“This stupid elf’s totally busted!!” Chloe shouted.

“Quit screwing around!” Runoa broke in between them and grabbed the elf by the collar. “Lyu! Snap out of it already!”

“—Guh?!”

Runoa slapped Lyu back and forth across the cheeks. Her long ears flinched from the sudden pain and she finally returned to her senses.

“Runoa, Chloe...What was I...?”

“Listen, we found them!”

“!!! R-really?!”

“How many times do we have to say it?! Let’s hurry up and go! We also need to make sure the kid’s butt is still safe!”

““Syr’s not you!””

Lyu and Runoa hit Chloe with an openhanded chop and a backhanded fist as she started breathing heavily.

“What are mew guys doing?! Hurry up already!”

The three of them were still bickering as they rushed over to Ahnya, who was waving in the distance.

“I’m begging youuuuuuu! Hermeeeeeeeees! Please help meeeeeee!”

“I said stop that! Don’t tug at my clothes, Hestia!!”

Around the same time the girls from the tavern were on the move, a pair of deities’ shouts rang out on East Main Street.

“It’s Bell! My sweet Bell didn’t come home last night!!!! That Syrwhosit might have gobbled him up!!! I’m begging you, help me find him!!!”

“I already sent Asfi out looking for them! So let me go already!”

Hestia was sobbing as she clung to Hermes’s waist with both hands, while he was desperately fighting to keep his pants from getting pulled down.

Hestia and Aiz had been looking for Bell since early in the morning only to run into Hermes instead a couple minutes ago. The

vestal goddess was in an ashen-faced panic at least as severe as a certain elf and had pounced on Hermes the moment she saw him, letting all of her emotions explosively spill out.

Given how much she and Aiz had already searched without finding any trace of Bell, she had concluded that there was no choice but to rely on *Hermes Familia*'s vast information network.

The moment she heard that Asfi was already working on it, Hestia slumped to the stone pavement. Hermes breathed a heavy sigh of relief as Aiz, who had been watching from the sidelines, apologetically spoke up,

"I'm sorry, Lord Hermes...We couldn't find Bell at all..."

"Ah, Aiz...it's no problem. Seeing how Hestia is willing to cooperate with you, this must be quite serious. Besides, I'm a bit curious about the two of them myself."

Aiz patted Hestia's back as she lay collapsed against the ground, moaning, "Beeeeeeelllllll!" until she heard what Hermes said.

"You are...?" she asked, cocking her head in surprise.

"Well, more precisely I'm curious about Syr."

Aiz looked even more confused as the god's orange eyes narrowed. But Hermes simply looked toward Babel and did not explain himself further.

A little while later, there was a momentary breeze as Asfi suddenly appeared out of thin air.

"Lord Hermes, I've found Bell Cranell. He and the girl are currently cutting through the second district in the northeast of the city."

"Amazing work, Asfi!"

By using the magic items Talaria and Hades Head, she had been invisible to most people while conducting the search from the sky.

"—The northeast's second district! That's where my Bell is?!"

"Yes. He's currently on the move together with Leon's coworker, Syr Flover."

"We've finally found them! Let's go, Wallenwhatsyourface!"

"R-right."

Hestia leaped from the ground, dragging Aiz with her as she charged ahead with wild abandon.

Asfi sighed as she watched them go.

"This was supposed to be my break...so how did I get saddled with new hassles, sir?"

"I'm sorry!"

"Please let me punch you in the face later..."

Asfi clenched her fist as her patron god had little response except flashing a big smile. Then she sighed one more time as they began following after Hestia and Aiz.



We turn off the main road, jogging through a spiderweb of crisscrossing back alleys.

By this point, we're deep in the second district, far away from Main Street. Even now, we just keep going, as if running away from something. I'm still being led along by the hand.

"U-ummm, can you please explain what's going on...?!"

"I'm sorry! For now, let's just keep going...! As far away as we can get...!"

Her dress flutters.

It is the same one as yesterday. Her small handbag rattles. Her breathing is getting ragged, and then finally, her pumps stop moving, as if she's reached her limits.

"Haah, haaah...!"

A wide set of stairs leading up, the arch of a bridge overhead, a nearby iron fence gate, wooden boxes and barrels strewn around, sooty billboards that seem indistinguishable from the other ones we've run past on the way here. We've ventured deep into this district's backstreets. It might as well be a labyrinth if you aren't familiar with the area. We stand alone in the alley with only the sounds of her panting breaking the silence. I can't hide my consternation as I watch her.

I touch my pocket quietly. After going back and forth on whether I should bring it up, I finally make up my mind...

"Umm, here."

"Ah...!"

I hold out the silver accessory I've brought from the inn. Seeing that—one half of the paired set—she freezes. She looks at it resting in my hand. It's like she's been confronted by something she had parted ways with once already. Finally, she slowly picks it up.

"I'm sorry...I must have forgotten it when I left the room."

"...How awful. After asking me to buy it and all."

"Hee-hee!...I really am sorry."

She slips it into her hair. It really does look just as stunning in her hair as yesterday. But her smile is still faint, fragile.

And I could swear I heard the words "I thought it would be pointless to keep it" slip from her lips. Moments after, she leaps into my chest.

"Wha...?!"

"Please, Bell. This is my last request."

I reflexively catch her as she looks down, her voice sounding weak and wrung out. I gulp as she stares up at me.

Her cheeks are pink, as if she has a fever. And her eyes are

glistening and damp. Few would doubt that this is what a young girl in love looks like, or perhaps a puppet in the thrall of an irresistible urge.

Her blue-gray eyes are entirely focused on me.

"All I have is this moment right now. If I let it slip away, my wish will never be fulfilled."

"...What...what are you...?"

"I struck a deal—a contract. And because of that, I will surely be pulled away from you."

Her voice is heartbreakingly frail. She keeps looking up at me as she struggles to speak. She stands on her toes, bringing her face ever closer.

I shudder in surprise, trying to hold her back a bit by pressing against her shoulders—

"Please...don't reject me."

—This is different from last night. Syr had not been this desperate then.

It feels like an inescapable deadline is closing in. As if she's trying to escape whatever looming fate awaits her. She might even be crying.

Finally, her lips slowly draw near—

"Slaughter all until the feast is finished."

Just then, a chant echoes in the deserted alley.

"—"

It happens in the space of an instant.

Immediately after I sense the coming spell, time seems to slow down as I kick the ground on pure instinct.

"Dáinsleif."

An intense flash appears. A jet-black slash that cuts down everything in its path. It's a miracle that I managed to react to the overhead attack at all.

A split second after I grabbed her and leaped wildly away, the stone pavement explodes.

"_____Ngh?!"

The aftershock batters us, throwing us across the ground before we finally come to a rolling stop. I raise my head.

The spot where we had been standing a second ago is demolished. I break into a sweat seeing what looks like a dragon's claw marks etched into the ground. As I stare in shock, a single person is standing there in the swirling debris...a single dark elf.

"...H...Hegni...?"

His fluttering black cloak, the sinister black sword, the intense presence he naturally gives off.

Had he kept shadowing me after giving me the slip, without ever turning his actual gaze on me? A person who's obviously powerful enough to be a first-tier adventurer of *Freya Familia* has just appeared where we should have been alone.

—Who? What?

But his appearance is strange. Is he really the same dark elf I met before?

The air about him is so different, I can't help wondering. I don't know what is going on. But either way, there is no mistaking the fact that a first-tier adventurer has turned his blade on me.

No, wait, not me, that was—

His attack hadn't been aimed at me at all. It had been aimed at *her*?!

“—State thy intentions.”

His chilly voice hangs in the alley. It is a sharp command. The voice of someone obeying only their rage. He is glaring daggers right at the girl turning paler by the second in my arms.

“The white hare is an offering for the goddess. There is no right by which you may violate him, girl.”

Hare? Me? Goddess's offering?

What are you talking about, Hegni?!

But I don't register in his eyes at all. The malice coming from him is overwhelming.

“I shall dispose of you.”

The blood drains from my face. My fingertips almost spasm. I frantically try to stand up as the girl beside me trembles.

“H-Hegni...I...!”

“I have no ears for thy prattle. I've borne witness to a reality that can brook no forgiveness. There is naught else to consider.”

Faced with an enraged first-tier adventurer, I reflexively draw the Hestia Knife at my waist. The dark elf's gaze is just as harsh when he turns his eyes on me.

“Begone, hare. That girl hath broken her contract with the goddess in her spate of foolishness. There is naught but to cut her down.”

“Wh...what are you saying?!”

“I said I'm going to bury the being behind you.”

He's not bluffing. He's serious!

“Everything is for the sake of the goddess. Die, woman.”

His cloak flutters as he charges toward us, blade at the ready.



He accelerates faster than my enhanced vision can track. I'm far too slow to react, so all I can do is put myself between her and his ultrafast attack.

"Out of my way!"

"Guh?!"

Even after placing myself directly in the path of his slash, the dark elf easily knocks me aside. A tremendous shock shoots through my body when his black blade collides with my black knife. The bones in my hand creak, coming close to breaking. As the aftershocks shake my field of vision, I immediately grab the shoulder of her dress as I'm knocked aside.

"Ahhh?!"

I somehow pull her into my arms as we are both sent flying. I clumsily roll across the ground, but I manage to use the momentum of his attack to regain some distance.

We're still far from safe. As I get back up, a cold sweat pours down my back. A single clash was all I needed to confirm just how different our strengths are.

—Forget counterattacking. Even if I focus my all on defense, he could easily kill us both in an instant.

It's different from my bouts with Aiz, who always held back some for me during training and during the incident with the Xenos. This is a first-tier adventurer...a Level 6's true strength! A level of power I can't hope to overcome!

"Begone!"

He blurs again, kicking off the ground and leaping overhead to swoop down from the sky like a bat. The movement is too quick to follow, and again the only thing I can do is put myself in front of the attack. There is a tremendous impact as sparks fly from my knife. My stance collapses miserably, but I desperately put all my strength into my back leg to at least hold on. At this point, he transitions into a raging stream of attacks.

"Ghhhhhhhhhh?!"

Right, left, overhead, from below. I keep defending against the intense series of attacks. I am parrying them, but it's draining my stamina at a terrifying rate!

"Withdraw! Do you wish to fall by my blade?!"

"Guh...!"

"Do not vex me further! It disrupts my control and makes it difficult to hold back! You'll have only yourself to blame when your head comes clean off your shoulders!"

His words are as relentless and intense as his sword. There isn't any trace of the dark elf who had been on the verge of tears and terrified of interacting with others. Just a sharp, menacing gaze and a

harsh tone with no hint of timidity.

He's clearly enraged, but there should be limits to that.

It's like he's an entirely different person!

I definitely heard a chant before he attacked us, and the words of a spell as well. Has he activated some kind of magic? It wasn't attack magic or an enchantment, though. Something different...!

"...Guh?"

As my stamina burns away, I suddenly realize something.

—Can he not attack me?

He could easily and precisely slice just a single leaf up in a tree, so between that and the sheer density of attacks, I can tell. He is only aiming for the girl behind me and nothing else. For whatever reason, maybe due to someone's strict instructions, he isn't allowed to hurt me.

Realizing that, I start using my body as a shield more aggressively.

"Tch!"

Confirming my suspicions, Hegni sounds frustrated as I forcefully throw myself into the path of his sword strikes.

Ordinarily, there would be no way for me to endure a first-tier adventurer's attacks. The fight would be over as soon as it began. It's insane to thrust my body out right where it's most likely to be sliced open, but right now, that's the only way I have of resisting him.

I keep jumping in his way to throw off his attack range. After I carefully watch his longsword lose momentum and manage to deflect it just barely with my knife a few times, he leaps backward, his cloak billowing in the wind.

"Haah, haah, haah...!"

"Impudent little...You bring shame to the title of Level Four by clinging to the shackles that bind me."

"Guh...!"

"You are one who must live up to the favor of the sublime goddess. You best not disappoint her—or else I really will kill you."

My breathing is already a mess, but he hasn't even broken a sweat as he pierces me with a chilling gaze.

I tremble. Not because I feel overwhelmed by his scorn. It's because his narrowed eyes are, even now, directing all his murderous rage at the girl cowering behind me.

But Freya Familia was protecting Syr until yesterday...!

I'm sure Hegni was no exception. So why has he suddenly started attacking? A broken contract? Some transgression? I don't understand what he's talking about at all!

When I left, Welf had said there was no reason we would end up in a conflict with *Freya Familia*! And he was right! But they are going after her instead now! What's going on?!

“The vexing brothers and the enraged cat will be here soon. Compared to being torn apart by them, a single strike from me would be a mercy. Do not run. Stop. Accept this fate. The moment of thy death shalt grant an eternal repose—I do not have time to prance about.”

I have to secure our escape in order to keep her from being killed. But whatever I want, I can't find an opening. As I desperately search for some way out, Hegni's arms hang limply, and his body...sinks.

“I shan't allow you to do anything more.”

I totally lose track of him.

“_____”

It's a swift first step, a movement fast enough to disappear from my field of view entirely. As time freezes, all that remains is the afterimage of his cloak. The moment I realize what I'm looking at, he's already kicked off the wall of the building beside me.

Even though he had been right in front of me, he's now launching a powerful attack that lands from the side. An impossible surprise attack like a ricocheting missile. Time starts moving again as I turn and reach out my hand, but I won't make it. His black blade is going to run her through.

“—Haaaaaaah!”

But a split second before it lands, a whirlwind suddenly appears, blocking his sword just in the nick of time.

“What?!”

An elf wielding twin shortwords stands in front of us.

His attack deflected, Hegni's redirected slash tears through the ground as he immediately backs away.

The resulting gust causes the waitress's uniform to flutter.

“Wha...? Lyu!”

“Bell...! What in the world is going on?!”

Having emerged gallantly at the last possible moment, her expression is twisted in acute unease. She doesn't take her eyes off the elf in front of her even as she calls out to me.

“Why is *Freya Familia* after you?!”

Even Gale Wind can't hide her agitation as three more shadows appear from overhead.

“Hey! What's going on here?!”

“I thought I was hearing some crazy fighting. Did Syr and the kiddo stumble into a battlefield?!”

“...gh!”

Runoa, Chloe, and Ahnya land around us to shield us from attack. But Ahnya seems to be at a loss for words when she sees Hegni.

“Begone, girls. My blade shall lay that woman low. Nothing more and nothing less.”

“What?! If that’s what you think, you’ve got another think coming!”

“Such a crazy-strong adventurer hitting a normal person with the full bloodlust treatment? You should control yourself better. Why don’t you hit the showers to cool your head? In fact, please do! I’m begging you!”

Runoa explodes at his statement, and Chloe is cracking jokes, but it’s clear they’re both terrified, too. Lyu stays quiet, but she hasn’t let her guard down at all.

Three versus one. No, four if we include me. But even so, we’re all outpowered by just a single adventurer.

““““What are you doing, Hegni?””””

But things just went from bad to worse.

Four voices call out at once as we all catch our breaths.

“We don’t need her anymore.”

“She infringed on the goddess’s divine will.”

“She’s nothing more than a criminal. There is no need to ask milady for permission.”

“It’s a festival of blood. If you’re going to take your sweet time, we’ll just finish it ourselves.”

If you close your eyes, they sound like a single person.

Matching sand-colored armor and helmets. They’re armed with a long spear, a great hammer, a great ax, and a greatsword—all weapons that look out of proportion with their size.

The four prums stand atop the surrounding buildings, looking down at us with cold glares.

“The Bringar...the Gulliver brothers.” The color drains from Runoa’s face.

She’s always so bright and cheerful, but right now, she’s showing a fear that I have never seen before. Runoa bites her lip, fighting to control the tremors building in her arms and legs.

“Kiddo, take Syr and run.”

“Eh?!”

“*One minute.* That’s all we can hold out for.”

I’m at a loss. She doesn’t even glance at me, but the look on her face makes it clear this isn’t a discussion.

It’s as if she’s silently screaming, “Just run. Hurry up and go. Run as far and as fast as you can. If you don’t, we’ll be totally destroyed in the blink of an eye.”

That is what it means to be surrounded by first-tier adventurers.

“Go!!!”

Thrust into motion by that cry, I can’t do anything but start

running.

I can't afford even a moment of hesitation if I want to save her from that execution ground. Without any time to waste, I grab her hand. The moment I turn my back, I feel an overwhelming presence approach.

Hegni's black cape flutters as he turns, and the four shadows drop down from above.

Lyu and the others launch themselves forward as the curtain rises on a one-sided rampage.



A maelstrom of blows.

Ordinarily Lyu would have retreated from that place of assured death no matter what it took, but she had to remain. Because Runoa, Chloe, and Ahnya were holding back the four terrifying prum warriors behind her. She had no choice but to face off against the dark elf standing before her.

“Hinder me not, fellow elf. Or do you wish to have your ears trimmed for your pride?”

“Dáinsleif Hegni Ragnar! A Level Six adventurer!”

In other words, a being overwhelmingly more powerful than Gale Wind.

Holding the twin shortswords, Futaba, in her hands, the wind screeched as she wielded them at high speed. There was a metallic clash every time they met Hegni's black longsword, and she had no way to dampen the impacts that ran through her entire body.

He's too fast! Too strong!

Even with all the quick thinking, experience, insight, and every bit of strength she could muster, it took all she had just to maintain her defense. There was nothing to do besides focus on evasion and parry the heavy slashes that would cut her in half if she tried to block them head-on. She was being deprived of even the faintest hope of a counterattack.

It was exactly the same as Bell before. Though Lyu far surpassed him when it came to techniques and tactics, she was still little more than a child before Hegni. In fact, were it not for her wealth of experience, she would have reached her end almost immediately.

Every second she extended the conflict was evidence of the unreasonable and absurd battles she had survived to date.

But an absolute difference in status separated Lyu and Hegni. She could not help shuddering at the gap that sat between the two of them. But at the same time, her spirit was bolstered by the belief that she needed to keep him from getting past her no matter what.

“—I see. So you are one of her favorites, too,” Hegni said, his eyes narrowing as if realizing something.

“What?”

“Just like that hare. One my blade may not fell of my own discretion. Truly a vexing task.”

Hegni did not answer her question as he pressed the attack with even more force.

The first strike was enough to numb Lyu’s hands when she deflected it, getting pushed back in the process as she used both her blades to keep her opponent from chasing after Bell. Her uniform was cut in a dozen places, and blood was welling up across her white skin as she continued to dance through the swirl of slashes.

I can’t grasp his real intent! But he’s started aiming for my limbs! He won’t kill me! It’s galling that he’s holding back, but if that’s the case, I might have a chance!

Recognizing the shift in Hegni’s swordsmanship, Lyu was hoping for a more equal match after noticing his apparent limitations. If she could fix him in place just a little longer without falling, then Bell and Syr would be able to get away.

But that didn’t hold for long.

Attacking up from the right—backstep, then dodge!

Her plan was—

“—The better their eyes, the more easily they fall prey to the abyss.”

—mercilessly shattered by Hegni’s knockout blow.

“?!”

His sinister black longsword’s blade leaped forward. The tip that Lyu had calculated would just graze her clothes easily tore into her chest.

His sword grew longer—no...

As time slowed to a crawl and the decisive blow landed, Lyu realized what had happened.

The reach extended!

The sword itself had not changed. Instead, the reach of the blade had grown, as if a razor-sharp vacuum had been created beyond the tip of the sword.

A spray of blood spewed from her body as the true nature of the attack dawned on her.

“A curse sword—!”

A roundhouse kick immediately crashed into Lyu as she shuddered from the slash to her chest. Hegni finished his sharp spin as the air around him settled down and a single elf slammed against the wall.

“Gah-aghhh...?!”

“My beloved blade, Victim Abyss, is a sword specialized in

destroying vanguards. It has slain countless swordfighters like you.”

Lyu was filled with anguish as the impact knocked the air out of her lungs. Hegni swung once, removing her blood from the blade with a flick of his wrist.

Victim Abyss—a superior weapon, a first-tier blade with a keen edge that a certain hexer had been involved in creating.

As Lyu guessed, it was a curse sword that was specifically designed for defeating warriors who specialized in swordfighting.

Having demonstrated the overwhelming difference in strength between the two of them, Hegni calmly took his leave.

Lyu could do nothing but soak in her own regret, unable to do anything about it as she lay there on the ground.

“““““We’ve seen you before.”””””

Runoa’s faced twisted as the four prums’ voices resounded.

“How many years ago was it?”

“The dark ages when those Evils assholes were still around.”

“There was a bounty hunter who didn’t know her place and came after us.”

“Never bothered remembering her face, but I do remember the way she fought with her fists.”

The voices sounded like they were laughing at her. And there was no doubt they were mocking her.

Despite the fact that the battle had already begun, Runoa’s fists had hit nothing but air. The knuckle-dusters on her fists were just whistling emptily as they tore through nothing.

She couldn’t land a single hit. Even with four targets, every swing was coming up empty. They were not moving particularly fast, and they were obviously holding back, too. It was like their four simultaneous movements were messing up Runoa’s focus, her aim—everything.

It was the same as back then. During the days when she had lost herself in the bloody work of being a bounty hunter, before she had been taken in by a benevolent tavern owner.

She had accepted a bounty to take out the four prum brothers only to be defeated laughably easily.

They looked the same, their eyes were the same, everywhere she looked it was the same. Like a scene from a nightmare.

The four sets of eyes watching her from behind those visors made her remember her past disgrace and terror.

“Damn it aaaaaaaaaaall!”

She roared, as if desperately fighting to not be consumed by despair.

“Don’t rush in! They’re messing with your head!”

“No, Runoa! Those four are...!”

Chloe’s and Ahnya’s words of caution fell on deaf ears. They tried to provide support, but their attacks were easily neutralized.

Neither Chloe’s agile assassin’s blade nor the knife Ahnya had borrowed from Chloe were able to hit the prums. Not even a scratch.

In short order, the four prums’ weapons rang out.

“That’s enough,” the elder brother, Alfrik, declared.

“““Stay your asses down.”””

It was over in just the blink of an eye.

Alfrik swung his spear, knocking back Runoa’s fists, Chloe’s blade, and Ahnya’s knife all at once. As time slowed to a crawl for the three of them, Grer’s greatsword tore into Runoa’s chest, Dvalinn’s hammer slammed into Chloe’s stomach, and Berling’s ax swung down at Ahnya.

The sounds of flesh tearing, bones breaking, and blood spraying echoed in the alley.

Runoa’s eyes shot wide open, blood dripped from Chloe’s mouth, and Ahnya was in complete shock as they were all sent flying in different directions. The human flew up into the air before slamming into the ground while the two catgirls were hurtled into a storage area containing stacks of empty barrels and boxes, sending up a cloud of dust.

Synchronized interception, advance, and then attack. The three girls had only been granted five seconds of combat.

“Dammit...!”

Runoa trembled, barely raising just her head as she groaned in pain and regret as blood pooled around her on the pavement.

The Gulliver brothers. Despite being only Level 5, many considered them collectively to be the equals of any Level 6 adventurer. The secret of their strength was their ability to act in unison without words or even glances—an instantaneous four-pronged attack. Their unparalleled coordination was hailed as the greatest teamwork in the city.

Runoa slipped into unconsciousness before the four prum warriors who refused to let their race’s handicap stand in their way.

“Argh...!”

Her hand trembling, Ahnya managed to stand back up. She held her bleeding shoulder and staggered forward as the empty wooden crates and barrels collapsed around her.

“““The hell are you doing, Berling?”””

“You didn’t finish her off.”

“Ah, what a blunder...Oh yeah, you’ve seen our move plenty of times before, haven’t you? Since you used to be in the familia.”

Of the four brothers' voices, Berling's actually addressed Ahnya. Her breathing ragged, Ahnya stared around in shock.

"Runoa, Chloe...Lyu..."

Her friends had been ruthlessly put down. She was all alone. Five on one. And her enemies were all first-tier adventurers.

Despair ate away at her, and her knees were on the verge of giving out completely.

"You dare turn your fangs on us again, Vana Alfi?" Alfrik asked.

"Guh...!" Ahnya's ears twitched agitatedly.

"A loser who dropped out of the familia's contest."

"That stray cat?"

"The mongrel abandoned by Lady Freya."

"Sh...Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! I'm not Vana Alfi, meow! I'm The Benevolent Mistress's Ahnya!"

The younger prum brothers mercilessly prodded old wounds as Ahnya closed her eyes, shook her head, and howled.

That was the final fortress protecting her heart. The last crutch for the girl who had been cast aside. It was the very core of Ahnya Fromel's being.

By happenstance, she was standing with her back to the alley Bell had fled down as she glared at the dark elf and prums.

"I'll protect them meow...! Protect Syr...Protect my family...!"

Unarmed, she flexed her fingers like a cat readying its claws. Fighting against the fear welling up inside her, she steeled herself with thoughts of her family.

But—

"The hell are you doing, scum?"

Her resolve crumbled the moment she heard that chilly voice.

"——"

Ahnya froze as she turned. A single cat person who was harder for her to face than five first-tier adventurers.

"B-Big Brother..."

Ahnya Fromel's one and only blood relation. Her brother, Allen Fromel, the one with the alias Vana Freya.

"...Wh-why are you...?!"

On close inspection, they resembled each other quite a lot—the shape of their eyes, the faint golden irises, the lay of their fur, even if the color itself was different. They had too many similarities.

"I'm the one asking questions here."

"I-I'm sorry, meow! I'm sorry, Big Brother!"

The bright, cheerful, easygoing girl from the tavern was nowhere to be found. Her voice and body trembled as she desperately tried not

to further draw her brother's ire. She seemed little more than a pitiful, love-starved stray.

"W-we just wanted to protect Syr, meow...! I didn't want my precious family to die, meow! So, so—"

"—Quit with that dumb cat routine!"

"Eep!"

Ahnya's frantic explanation was interrupted by an irate shout. Allen's rage was rising.

"How many times do I have to repeat myself?" Allen spit out. "Can your stupid, empty head not understand a single word I say?... Pissing me off."

"I—I'm sorry! I—I...!"

Ahnya's teeth chattered as the memories of old wounds to her body and mind welled up, evoking a swirl of grief and terror. Her brother's disappointed glare, his disparaging words—they all tore into Ahnya's heart.

"You're in the way. Get gone before my spear sends your head flying."

"W-wait...Wait, Big Brother! Whatever happens to me, please leave Syr—"

"Shut up."

Ahnya was desperately pleading with him, but those two words crushed her will to resist.

"Goddamned fool. Talking to you is just a waste of my time. Get outta my way."

Allen drew near, looking down on her from right in her face.

"I...I just...Syr...My family..."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she murmured incoherently.

She tried to at least guard the path behind her by keeping her body in the way, but—

"Move."

She could not resist with her brother's scornful glare directly over her head.

"...Yes, Brother."

Tears fell from her eyes as the strength drained from her body.

She hated herself for yielding as she collapsed to her knees. Her will to fight totally gone, she fell like a limp rag doll.

Allen did not even spare her a glance as he walked past. Hegni and the Gulliver brothers followed as she wept silently. The tears wouldn't stop. The cheerful cat of the tavern was nowhere to be found. Alone at last, she seemed like nothing more than an abandoned stray kitten who had lost everything.



It was like Aiz's adventurer's instinct was calling out to her.

Hestia noticed her reaction.

"Wh-what is it?"

"...Someone is fighting in that direction..."

"Eh?!"

Beneath the clouded sky, they were in the middle of chasing after Bell.

They had gone straight north from East Main Street and were approaching the area where Asfi had spotted Bell.

"You sure it's not just a little festival brawl?"

"I'm sure...This isn't that sort of play fighting."

"...Asfi. Going invisible like that, are you planning to go scouting or something?"

"My apologies. But even I'm getting a bad feeling about this...It feels like some unimaginable monsters are on a rampage."

Aiz's sharp gaze and Asfi's cold sweat caused Hestia to catch her breath.

Listening closely, she could hear it. The sound and faint tremor of something slamming against the ground or a wall. And to someone not paying attention, what might sound like a music instrument but was actually the high-pitched whine of blade meeting blade.

They came to a stop, as if a barrier had been erected before them in the middle of an otherwise utterly normal alley.

"*Haah, haah...*!...Eh? Goddess? And Aiz? And Hermes and Asfi?!"

Just then, the boy they had been searching for appeared, completely out of breath.

And that was when it leaped into Hestia's view.

"_____"

Time stopped for Hestia. She was at a loss for what to say.

Her gaze was met by a pair of blue-gray eyes.

Sensing Hestia's gaze, the girl looked down, as if the situation she had dreaded and had been avoiding for a long time finally occurred.

She slipped behind Bell, as if to hide herself even just a little.

"Bell, what happened?"

"...*Freya Familia*...we were attacked by their first-tier adventurers. Lyu and the others held them off, but..."

"Leon did what?!"

What should normally have been something so dangerous it couldn't be ignored did not even draw a reaction from Hestia.

What is she? No, what is that?

Noticing Hestia's shock, Hermes stepped forward.

"...Would it be correct to assume that you are the one they're after, Syr?"

The girl was hugging herself, and then, as if steeling her will, she

leaned in.

“Please, Lord Hermes! Please help me!”

“...”

“Just this once is enough, so please give me time! Even if I’ve defied her divine will, I’ve not broken my agreement with the goddess!”

“...Very well. Then you may rely on me.” Hermes’s expression was mysterious as he acceded to her request. “Aiz, could you lend me your strength? Just holding off the first-tier adventurers is enough. I swear on my name I won’t allow it to devolve into a conflict between Loki and Freya.”

“...Understood.”

“Asfi, you support Aiz.”

“W-wait a minute, Lord Hermes! Don’t go dragging me into a fight between first-tier adventurers!”

“You’re worried about Lyu, too, aren’t you?”

“...Ngh! Aaaarghhh!”

Hermes patted Asfi’s head apologetically as she conceded. She glared at him as she brushed his hand away and ran off after Aiz. After watching them go, Hermes turned to face Bell, who was obviously confused by what had just transpired.

“Even if they are outnumbered, Aiz and Asfi should be able to hold them off a little while. Go, Bell...Protect her.”

“...Yes, sir.”

He nodded and then took her hand as they started running away.

“Ah—W-wait! Bell!”

Hestia finally returned to her senses, but it was too late. The pair had disappeared from sight before she could say anything.

“...Hermes...”

“Yes, Hestia?”

As Hestia struggled to wrap her head around what was going on, Hermes turned to face her with a revoltingly calm expression.

“What is she...?”

“...”

“What was that...? What the heck was that?!” Her trembling voice turned to a shout.

The sound of violent sword clashes rang out, as if to further throw her off balance. It was a furious melody composed by Aiz, Asfi, and *Freya Familia*’s first-tier adventurers. But at that moment, she paid them no heed.

As she pressed Hermes, still in the grips of her shock, he finally displayed a bit of emotion for the first time. He looked exhausted, his face like that of an old man.

“In truth, I can’t be absolutely certain. I have made observations

of little importance, but *my eyes can't pierce her*. What is she? *Who* is she? It's the same for the other deities. That's part of what makes spending time with her so appealing...and so frightening. Loki's maybe the only one who's seen through her entirely."

Hestia shook her head violently. "That's not what I was asking!"

She simply didn't understand. An empty space that did not exist within her memories. A supra-rational logic far removed from the natural order. An Irregular, the unknown of the mortal realm...

"Is that actually a goddess?!"

The dark clouds were rent, as if moving in time with a goddess's madness.



We're running.

We head south, using narrow back alleys as we cut through the cluttered industrial district. All to keep the girl beside me from dying.

"I'm sorry, Bell...! It's all my fault...!"

Her voice is weak and frail, filled with guilt. Glancing back, her blue-gray eyes are looking down pitifully. I don't want to hear Syr sound like that, to see Syr look like that, so I raise my voice.

"Please don't act like that! I don't want to see that look on your face!"

"Bell..."

"Please don't say it's your fault! Everyone is lending you their strength! So don't give up!"

"...!"

"We have a lot of apologizing to do when this is over! To Lyu, and Aiz, and everyone else!"

I squeeze her hand as the words that come to mind fly from my mouth.

I don't even really know what I am saying. But even so, I can sense her looking up behind me and I feel her squeeze my hand back.

Think. Think hard.

Freya Familia is serious. They are absolutely intent on killing her. What's happening? And what's going on with Syr? I needed to find out. If I don't understand the situation, nothing will change!

"If there was just some place we could hide...!"

Both of us are breathing heavily. Even if he had been holding back, I was still on the receiving end of a first-tier adventurer's powerful attacks, and my body is spent. I need to stop and rest for at least a short while.

"I—I know a, *haah*, place to hide...!"

"Really?!"

“Yes! Just up ahead...!”

This isn’t a time where I can be picky, so I jump at her suggestion.

“Please lead the way!”



“Okay!” I said in reply.

I nodded deeply at his smile, at his gaze.

—I ran into the goddess of the hearth.

—A chance encounter with his patron goddess.

Even though I had been warned again and again that I must never meet her.

I was a criminal at this point. There was no excuse. The charges were already etched into my body.

The crime of disobeying the goddess’s command.

The crime of plotting under the cover of my contract with the goddess.

The crime of acting on that plot and attempting to steal away the one the goddess favored.

It was understandable that they would fly into a rage over those transgressions. Entirely reasonable that they would try to kill me, even.

I was attempting to snatch away something reserved for the goddess. There was no hope for salvation left.

But still. Even though I had hardened my resolve, his blinding sentiment still set me afire.

He shared a small piece of his pure, clear heart with me.

My breathing was ragged. My chest was hot. A flush was rising in my cheeks.

I finally understood the true reason the goddess had fallen for him. He had driven my heart wild. His slender but powerful hand pulled mine along. That was the hand the goddess loved. And at this moment, that hand and those fingers that should have belonged to the goddess were mine, and mine alone.

—*I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.*

I apologized over and over in my heart both to the goddess and to the followers who had sworn their loyalty to her.

I won’t ask for forgiveness, but please just let me finish this—my dream...my greatest sin—



She guides us to an abandoned building on the outskirts of the industrial district.

It looks like it had been some kind of factory or something, but the yawning boxlike building is engulfed by green vines now. The doors have all been sealed shut, but there is one point where the wall has collapsed, hidden behind a waterfall of overgrowth.

Yeah, once we're inside, there would be no way for people to notice us.

I crouch down and slip through the small hole, which leads into a short passage, and then the passage opens out into the interior of the building.

"So big..."

This space could hold thousands of people easily. On the far side, the floor and walls are charred, as if there had been a fire here in the past. Metal pillars are bent, folding all the way back down to the ground. The trolley rails that had once crisscrossed the ground are almost entirely gone. Most of the equipment has been removed, and all that is left, shoved into corners, is trash that couldn't be reused.

Looking up, the gray sky is visible. There are several holes in the ceiling.

"I found it one time when the children from the orphanage were begging to explore outside Daedalus Street. It was dangerous, though, so I only came that one time..."

I can believe that. It definitely has the feeling of a secret base, and I can see the children playing excitedly—but I shake my head.

I turn to meet her gaze.

"...Could you tell me why *Freya Familia* is after you?"

"...The reason is because the goddess—Lady Freya—has taken a liking to you."

"...Me?"

"Yes. That is why they are so mad. Despite knowing that you are the object of Lady Freya's affections...I attempted to steal you away."

Cold air surrounds us.

I am more than a little shaken by what she has said. But at the same time, I can't immediately deny it as impossible, either.

—"I love you."

Because I still remember what the silver-haired goddess had whispered.

"There are several things I haven't told you yet. I've told you little more than lies. But it was the truth when I said I was going to be separated from you."

"..."

"I..." She pauses for a moment. "...I don't have anything beyond this moment.

"If I'm to achieve my wish..."

Her voice trails off, so faint it might disappear at the slightest

touch. Her blue-gray eyes look up at me. She draws closer, as if not wanting to lose even a second of the moment we are in. She stops right in front of me before continuing,

“I don’t mind if it is just out of compassion or pity, but if you could please just accept me—”

She is pleading with me. There is no mistaking it. This is her ardent, heartfelt wish. Realizing that, I quietly close my eyes.

She closes the remaining distance between us. There is a thud as her handbag falls to the ground. She reaches her arms around my back, and I—



His eyes opened.

My heart ached whenever I saw his red eyes.

I remembered something the goddess had said long ago. That his red eyes and his pure, translucent soul were like beautiful jewels. It was all true. That was what attracted both the goddess and me. That was what drove both of us mad.

As if being drawn in by his eyes, I closed the distance. Our lips drew near. My trembling chest drew close to his. I dropped my handbag that had served its purpose, and slowly raised my arms.

—Why did the goddess have to meet you?

If I had met you first...If I had known what would happen...It might have turned out so differently...

The single wish burning away at my heart. The emotions welling up. I desperately tried to hold it in, murmuring to myself not to let it burst out. Aaaaah, but I can’t deny it. I’ve been enchanted by the boy before me, since long ago. As if I was linked with the goddess, a reflection of the goddess. But that was exactly why. That was why I couldn’t control this urge. I know it is a taboo that must never be embraced. It is nothing less than a betrayal of the goddess who saved me. But I don’t know how to contain these feelings. Yes, you are—

[illegible]

—I will never forgive you!!!

Because she met you, the goddess became *corrupted*! Because of you, the goddess is attempting to degrade herself!

I know! I'm the only one who knows! I can understand the depths of her heart that even she can't know!

That is why! I Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! You!

You—YOU—the one who changed the sublime empress!

—Why did the goddess have to meet you first?!

If I had met you first!

If I had known what would come!

I would have killed you before you ever met her!

Nothing comes of grief. Anger never appeases anything. And hatred can never reclaim anything. I know. I am fully aware. I understand.

That's why...

That's why I betrayed the goddess.

I hid my true intent when I approached her with my proposition. I broke my contract. I committed the greatest taboo. Out of love for the goddess, I trampled upon her ().

That is my wish. That is my entreaty. That is my loyalty. And that is my bloody graveside offering to this man as well!

The other followers can't get in the way now! The symbol of my sin is right before my eyes! The feelings I imagined whenever I thought of you can't stop my blade now!

Even if the goddess curses me! Even if I'm branded a criminal! Even if I'm battered and broken and cast aside! I will shatter the nightmare haunting her!

The goddess has no need for an Odr to seduce her. For a partner who steals her heart. She doesn't need any of that!



She closes the last gap. There is a thud as her handbag falls to the ground. She reaches her arms around my back, and I—grab her slender arm.

“So then who are you?”

There is a long moment of silence that pierces our ears.

Her eyes open wide.

Her arm cannot move. The knife she's holding in her right hand

cannot reach me.

Time starts moving again as she pours strength into her arm. But it is hopeless. I have a grip on the inside of her elbow. The cold knife can't find its way to my heart.

Here in this sealed off, abandoned factory, no one would find us. In other words, there's no chance of interference. No one to save me. This abandoned factory is the grave she had prepared for me.

"...What are...what are you saying?" Her lips and voice are trembling.

"I'm saying that you aren't Syr."

This time, I put more force into my hands. Her face twists in pain as the knife drops to the ground with a loud clatter.

When I release her, she clutches her arms and backs away from me. Her pumps knock aside the fallen handbag—where she had been hiding her knife—covering it in dust.

"...How could you say that, Bell...? I-I'm me. You've been protecting me all day, haven't you?!" She desperately tries to paper it over with a smile.

"Yes, even though I didn't know what was going on, I did protect you. Because I didn't want anyone to die. Even if you aren't Syr."

As she gasps, I point out, "I haven't once called you Syr today."

I had noticed it from the very start. From the moment I found her while I was searching for Syr. I knew something was off ever since I caught my breath after seeing her eyes. And her face.

She wasn't the girl who was always working at The Benevolent Mistress. She wasn't the one who always made lunches for me. Her smile wasn't the same as the one Syr always showed me. When we met, for just a single instant, her murderous intent showed itself.

My suspicion turned to certainty when she refused to let go of her handbag throughout everything that happened. My enhanced hearing let me hear the metallic sound of something with a blade—probably a knife—hitting another piece of metal inside the bag.

Because of the tenuous situation, Lyu and the others from the tavern who came to help hadn't noticed. No, even without that, they might not have noticed. That was just how perfectly her figure, voice, gestures, and everything else matched Syr.

That was why I had said, *"Please don't act like that! I don't want to see that look on your face!"*

Because even if her voice and face were the same, she wasn't Syr.

"You intended to kill me from the start."

"...Ngh!"

She recoils when I say it so calmly.

She had surely known that I was being followed by Hegni. So she took a gamble. She had intentionally enraged them, drawing them all

to us, and then attempted to break their surveillance in the process of escaping. All so that we could end up here. Just the two of us.

The knife lying on the floor is proof of her true intent. Though that alone isn't proof enough that she isn't Syr.

"It is possible that Syr came to hate me enough to want to kill me. And if that were true, I would be sad, and of course, there's no way for me to know what lies in someone else's heart.—But you're different. Because you aren't Syr."

"H...how? How can you be so sure that I'm not Syr?!"

"The accessory in your hair."

"Eh?"

"That accessory I gave you today—the one you are still wearing right now—wasn't Syr's."

The blue-and-silver accessory in her hair trembles.

She's speechless.

"That was mine."

A paired set.

When I had left the inn, there was just one half of the set on the table: mine. The real Syr had taken her half with her when she left. That could only mean one thing.

"I thought that you might be a fake, so I tested it by giving that to you. And you believed me."

"...!"

"You were tricked by something that the real Syr would never have fallen for."

Her hands are trembling as she takes the accessory out of her hair. On the reverse, it has the word "Knight" written in Koine.

—*"Can I have the spirit one? You should take the knight's side!"*

Syr had chosen the spirit half.

The fact that this person had taken my half without thinking was undeniable proof.

"You probably know almost everything about Syr. But your knowledge must not be perfect, either. You never suspected that the accessory was mine."

Shared memories, or maybe seeing events through her eyes.

It's almost too extraordinary to believe, but it isn't out of the question that some kind of spell or magic item could make it possible. Particularly if the magic had the limitation of only being able to share the memories or vision of a single target.

The girl in front of me had probably not noticed the hair ornament because of whatever limitation there was on her magic.

"Therefore, you aren't Syr," I conclude.

Her eyes go wide as her head slumps. The accessory slips to the ground from her hand. As it clatters across the ground, I lean over and

pick it up.

There is a long silence.

We stand across from each other in the middle of the abandoned factory as she finally, slowly begins to speak.

“Seeing through me from the very start...how unbearably shameful.”

I recoil. Her voice is still Syr’s, but now it’s painfully cold.

She looks up. There is a somber gleam to her blue-gray eyes. A dull, deep shadow the likes of which would never darken Syr’s eyes.

“If you had simply not noticed, I would have embraced you gently, killing you in my arms...”

Her words are chillingly inhuman. There is no mistaking her hostility and desire to kill me. It’s enough to make *Freya Familia*’s rage seem almost cute. It feels like a frozen hand is gripping my heart.

“Who...are you...? Why do you look the same as Syr?”

“You have no need to know, since I lost my bet with her,” she says. Then, with a sense of resignation, she continues, “Lady Syr awaits you in a place only the two of you know. A location from a memory even I can’t access. Please go to her.”

A place from a memory that only the two of us shared...?

Hearing that, a certain scene suddenly springs to mind. A memory that belongs only to Syr and me. I stand there frozen as I look back at the mirror image of Syr standing before me.

“...Are you not going to leave? At this rate, *Freya Familia* will...!”

“...Still worrying about me even knowing I’m a fake? How much more must you shame me before you will be satisfied? You truly are a horrid hypocrite.”

“Guh...”

“If you aren’t here, they won’t kill me. Though I betrayed the goddess, so long as I let you go, I will be punished but won’t lose my life.”

“...Really?”

“Yes, unfortunately.—So please just go already.”

I can’t sense any more willpower from her. No hostility, no rage. It’s as if all that just slipped away.

I can’t do anything other than trust her. I twist up my face as I look at her emotionless expression one last time and then turn to leave the ruins.



The boy left.

His presence faded into the distance.

As the girl in the form of Syr sensed that, the next instant, she was

struck in the head with a spear shaft.

She was sent flying. The blow took her through a pillar and slammed her into the far wall with the force of a river breaking free from a dam.

There was a deafening boom as a cloud of dirt and dust burst into the air. Then the owner of the silver spear, Allen, spoke.

“You started this farce on your own authority...You even abandoned your post for it. So what the hell was it you wanted to do so badly?”

She collapsed to the floor, her hand spasming, barely breathing. But despite sustaining an attack that would have killed a normal person in any number of ways, she was still largely intact.

Her head was bleeding badly, her limbs were covered in wounds, and she had been seriously hurt, but she was still alive.

“Answer me before you die, Hörn.”

As if triggered by hearing that name, a shroud of light surrounded Syr and then melted away, scattering into fragments like a mirror shattering.

The magic had been dispelled after the caster had taken too much damage.

And what lay there in Syr's place once the light faded was a beautiful girl with faded ashen hair and a pitch-black left eye that seemed consumed by the dark of night.

The Gulliver brothers and Hegni came down from a hole in the roof just like Allen had.

“And you're the so-called head chamberlain?”

“Turning your back on our goddess's divine will. What kind of attendant are you?”

Hörn's lip quivered as she responded to Dvalinn's and Grer's scorn.

“I...have no excuse...What I perpetrated was undoubtedly nothing less than turning my back on the goddess...It was something unforgivable...”

She acknowledged her sin as if gasping for breath, her long hair swaying as it covered half her face.

Hegni's eyes narrowed.

“Your schemes proceeded far too readily for one such as yourself...Did you join hands with Ottar and my fated foe, Hedin?” Hegni spat venomously.

Indeed. Or more precisely, the girl called Hörn had deceived Hedin and Ottar to assist in her attempt to kill the boy.

The first day of the festival had been spent with the real Syr. The

second day had been the fake.

That was why they were so enraged. They were furious with Hörn, who had attempted to do something to the boy who was, by every right, the property of their goddess.

If she had reached out to them for help in her plot, the plan would have failed then and there. The extremists would not have hesitated to eliminate anything that went against the goddess's will.

All for the sake of the goddess.

"You were planning to have us kill you all along," Allen said furiously, seeing through the fact that her plan had been formed from the start under the assumption that she would have to sacrifice herself.

"...I betrayed the goddess whom I love and swore loyalty to. Whether my ambition was fulfilled or not, this life that the goddess saved would be returned to her..."

Hörn placed her trembling hand on the floor, raising her upper body as she answered falteringly.

There was no pain or fear. With her face adorned in a bloody mask, she was the very image of a martyr.

"Don't go foisting your grubby life onto her, you trash."

But Allen rejected her sentiment.

Hörn looked down for a moment before raising her head and shouting:

"Yes, I hated the boy who stole the goddess's heart! I was jealous of him even!...But it was not merely that! I feared for the goddess! Feared that she would change! Feared that at this rate, our one and only queen would become corrupted and fall!"

"..."

"You cannot understand! But I, I alone can! That's why! That's the reason! I had no other choice! Even if she did not desire it! Even if I was hated for all eternity! I had no choice but to commit this sin for her sake! Because she must always remain the goddess!"

The others watched silently as a gruesome grin crossed her face.

"Yes—there's no way it could be right for her to lower herself to the level of a mere *girl*!

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha..."

A raucous, broken laugh welled up from her throat, spewing out to the sky beyond the broken ceiling above.

Her laughter revealed her absolute faith that resided in her loyalty to the goddess. Her black eye was shining, dreaming of her mistress's eternal glory even at this very moment.

Every bit of her had been offered up to the goddess whom she worshipped.

"You're not the goddess's attendant," Allen finally spat out.

“You’re just a mad cultist.”

She neither denied nor acknowledged his accusation. She just laughed as her eyes narrowed and a single drop of blood ran down her cheek.



It was snowing that day.

Beautiful, cruel white fragments fell from the sky that night.

The goddess who found me asked:

“I was thinking of helping you, but...is there anything you desire?”

And I had answered:

I want to become you. I want to stop being me and become clean, warm. I want to become you.

“You want to become me? How ravenous can you be?! There has never been a child who asked for that before!”

She smiled at my arrogant craving. And then she said:

“Then I shall give you a name. In exchange, you will give me your name, yes?”

It was a trading of fates—an exchange of true names.

A contract, a holy ritual allowing my body and spirit to cease being that lonely, filthy little girl.

I offered up the name Syr and received the divine name Hörn.

And the moment I became one of her followers, the moment my longing became reality thanks to her blessing, I was overjoyed.

Vana Seiðr—divine sorcery—a transformation spell.

It was a secret technique that allowed me to become the one and only goddess.

When it was active, I shared in all of her senses, and I also experienced her emotions in a one-sided connection.

I was able to feel everything she felt, to be a part of everything connected to her!

Other than being unable to use Arcanum, I had become the goddess through and through!

An honor undeserved. A climax welling inside me. The girl who had been nothing more than garbage strewn on the side of the road was basking in the blessings of the heavens.

Ahhh!

I was the goddess’s daughter Hörn!

I offered up the simple girl Syr and became a daughter of the

divine!

I would become her arms and legs, her nose, ears, and eyes! My fate would be shared as a small piece of her for all eternity!

But! But! But!

Then that boy appeared!

A being who bewitched my sublime goddess! The goddess fairer than all!

When my technique was active, when I became the goddess, I could sense her feelings! I knew! It was something only I could know!

The goddess was trying to cease being a goddess!

That supreme, noble, heavenly ruler whom mortal ken could not even begin to comprehend was attempting to lower herself, to become a mere stain upon the land!

The goddess was attempting to degrade herself, to become a mere girl—and that could never be allowed to happen!

That's why!

That's why!!!

I had no choice but to resolve myself!

No choice but to give in to my basest impulses! Because I knew!

I had no choice but to plot his assassination, even if it went against the goddess's divine will!

It was impossible to kill him during the mundane everyday encounters. He was still continuing to grow even as I agonized over what was happening, and he had already grown too strong. As I was now, even if I waited for a moment when he was alone, I would not be able to strangle him in his sleep. And I didn't have any conspirators to help me. Even if the rest of the familia were jealous of him, they had never truly considered a plot to murder him. I was alone.

That day, when she told me to deliver the invitation to him for the Goddess Festival, no one could understand the emotions swirling inside me.

That was the final straw. My barely contained emotions forced me to act.

That day, the first time I met him face-to-face, when I was standing in front of his home...

No one could understand how unstable I was, desperately restraining my immense urge to kill him while simultaneously feeling an intense love for the being before my eyes because of how deeply I shared in the goddess's emotions!

I had no choice but to use this festival!

It was my one chance to change places with her! My chance to get close to him! My one and only opportunity to slip within his reach!

My body and spirit were ravaged by the feelings of affection for him, but my loyalty was unwavering. My faith overcame all meaningless emotions, weeding them out and scorching my very being with hellfire to accomplish my duty.

The goddess needed to be freed of the spell binding her no matter what the cost.

My life would be offered up for the act of purification that would cleanse her of her corruption.

Yes.

The goddess must always remain the goddess!

The goddess is...the goddess is—!

However, my desire could no longer be fulfilled.

Intense rage, cold grief, and tranquil happiness—when the goddess experienced emotions that were too powerful, it would sometimes cause a swell and her ego would subsume my trifling consciousness. The fact that I could only grasp a fragmentary picture of what happened at the cathedral was my downfall—no, I cannot make excuses.

I lost to him.

He saw through my identity.

I was unable to kill him. And unable to stop him.

I lost at a game of my own making.

The rules that she established at the start...

—If your deception is ever discovered, that will count as your loss.

—From that point on, you will be barred from being involved with him in any way.

—You will never be allowed to meet him ever again.

Thinking back on it now, she had probably seen through my intentions even then. Recognized that I was using my feelings toward him as a cover for the murderous intent buried underneath. But at the same time, she had accepted the game for her own purpose, in order to test him.

In the end, I had been dancing in the palm of her hand only to be finished off by him.

What a pitiful, foolish ending.

I did not even rise to the level of a clown. In the end, I had not become anyone, just like she said.

But that's fine.

It was galling. Maddening. Grievous.

But there was still a way to wake her from her nightmare.

I had taken my uncompromising path because I had not wanted her to be hurt. I had intended to bear my crimes and atone with my life. I had attempted that because I had not wanted that sublime goddess to experience even a single wound, but—

[illegible]

But that won't change the result!

Do you know who his eyes are on?!

Do you know how steadfast and unwavering his unclouded feelings are?!

No matter how much she might desire it, no matter how maddening he is, the results will never change!

With this, she'll finally be freed from the spell binding her!

And by none other than the boy's own hand!

Because of his purity, that boy will shatter the goddess's wish!

I am satisfied even if I'm the only one who knows!

Yes.

I'm the only one who may know the true meaning of the tears running down my cheek.



I don't stop.

I'm trusting my memory, not really sure if it's right but somehow still sure of myself, I keep running to the place that links just the two of us.

As if to confirm my memories, the closer I get, the fewer people there are around. The hustle and bustle of the festival fades. The silence deepens.

Racing through the maze of roads, over a hilly rise, and down a walled-in valley. The ashen sky roils as the thick clouds begin to move when I finally reach a familiar little park.

It is in the labyrinthine Daedalus Street neighborhood.

She's sitting there on a brick bench, eyes closed, trusting that the one she is waiting for will come.

“Svr...”

This is the place where she had first said that she liked me. Where she had rescued me when I had been starting to crack, when so much had happened and I didn't know what to do.

—“I...I like how you always keep running.”

The cradle of our memories, a place only the two of us know. A place where our hearts had nestled close together.

“!”

I pause at the entrance of the park and look up in surprise. Master —Hedin is standing there atop the stone building. In position guarding Syr, he says nothing. He isn't forcing me to do anything. No orders. I can't begin to know what he is thinking as his coral-red eyes look at me. And then he turns away elegantly, as if to say his role in this is done.

I watch him leave and then turn back to her. There is a gentle breeze. As if urged on by that, I set foot in the park. The small white flowers growing among the greenery rustle softly in the wind.

She slowly opens her eyes and, seeing me, her lips curve into a gentle smile.

“You found me, Bell.”

“...Someone who looks just like you let me know.”

“Argh. At times like this, you're supposed to say, ‘I just had a feeling you would be here.’”

Her voice is kind, like she is chiding a child, and not really serious at all.

She stands up, and we face each other, as if drawn to the center of the park.

She is wearing the same dress as yesterday. She is wearing the accessory I had given her in her blue-gray hair. The matching accessories symbolizing the fate of the knight and spirit.

“Why?” I ask. “Why did you do something like this?”

Even though there are so many other things I want to ask, that's the first thing that came out.

“I said it last night,” Syr says with a smile. “I wanted to convey my feelings. And I wanted to confirm my feelings.”

She reaches up and touches the accessory in her hair.

“Even if there are other people who like you, if you still came to find me, I thought maybe I could afford to be a little conceited.”

“...”

“Also, because I wanted to make the most of the here and now. Because I hated the idea of time passing without doing anything.”

“...”

“And more than anything, because I was scared. Scared that I, who despised boredom, found myself wishing for the current standstill to continue.”

It isn't an excuse or an explanation, nor a request for empathy.

“But I couldn't really understand it.”

It looks like she's searching for the real her in a sea of words.

“Right now, more than anything, I don't understand myself at all.”

She's wearing her familiar smile, and yet for some reason it feels like she's crying.

Like a child frozen in place, not knowing what to do. Like she's caught between being one who loves and one who evokes love from others.

"But I finally realized that, most likely, no matter what I tried... the only way to escape this anguish was to confess everything."

Now that's it come to this, I finally realize it.

Her voice is trembling. She's putting on a brave front, summoning her courage even though she's afraid of what lays before her.

For some reason, my knees start to tremble. My hands feel like they might start twitching at any moment. My teeth are on the verge of chattering.

I've come to an inescapable fork in the road. There is no choice that will allow our relationship to simply continue like it has up until now.

"I love you, Bell."

She holds both of her hands to her chest as she leans forward.

"I love you. I want to be with you forever. Please choose me." Her eyes are glistening. "It's so painful. I want you to hold me. I don't want to have to worry about tomorrow coming anymore."

She doesn't even know herself why tears are gathering in her eyes.

"Even though I never wanted to know this feeling right now, I still can't help wanting to know what lies beyond it!"

Her earnestness tears at my heart, and my whole body trembles.

"I love you, Bell..."

My heart quivers.

I can't hear anything.

I can't see anything but her.

The rest of the world falls away, leaving just the two of us.

The stillness is earsplitting, and the moment's silence feels like it will last an eternity.

The things she had wanted to hide. The things she had wanted to avoid. The things that scared her. She's laid them all bare before me.

Trying to run away would be unforgivable. I have to respond in kind. I have to lay everything bare, too.

My heart groans. I furrow my brow. I want to wrap my hand around my pounding heart and squeeze.

I desperately want to just take the easy way out, to end the pain and just accept her feelings.

But.

But.

But...

Remember.

Remember what Welf said.

Check.

Check what actually lies in my heart.

Ask.

Ask who it is that I look up to, what I want, what I swore to chase after.

Answer.

—Bell Cranell, natural-born fool, cannot tell a lie.

A droplet hits my shoulder. The sky is on the verge of crying.

I look at her, and she looks back at me.

And that tiny gap left between us represents an ending.

I didn't know.

I truly didn't know.

I didn't know it was so painful to turn down someone's love.

"I'm sorry..."

The sky quietly begins to weep.

■ EPILOGUE “Alea Iacta Est” II



© Suzuhito Yasuda

 EPILOGUE

“ALEA IACTA EST” II

The sky was crying.

Large tears fell, erasing all other sounds, as if the very world had been overcome with grief.

The rain was heavy enough to make it hard to see, robbing the town of its festive atmosphere.

People disappeared, quickly fleeing for the shelter of roofs. Covered by a dark shroud, the sky was miserably cold. Everyone looked up anxiously.

The white tower piercing the sky grew blurry.

The harvest blessing faded in the city.

And amid all that, Syr was walking alone. She did not have an umbrella as the rain poured down on her, drenching her clothes, skin, hair, everything.

Somewhere along the way, she had lost her pumps. Her feet were covered in scratches as if she had been running, but she could not remember anymore. But all of a sudden, she realized that the scene around her had changed. The boy who had been in front of her had vanished, and all that remained was her lone footsteps mixed with the sound of the drumming rain.

Her bare feet sent countless ripples through puddles as she walked along a deserted road. Her wet hair covered her eyes and countless droplets poured down her cheeks.

Finally, as if guided by the rain, she arrived at the deserted Amour Square.

The place where she had waited for him. The place whose name derived from the divine word for love.

The bronze statue of a goddess standing in the square was naked to the sky's lamentations.

Syr walked on. Not saying anything. Not feeling anything. Like a ghost. Like a lost child. Like an emissary, or perhaps a holy woman.

She stopped in the middle of the plaza. The rain cleansed Syr's body. It washed away all the grief and all the anguish.

She looked down quietly.

As her blue-gray hair clung to her face, the accessory in her hair

deflected some of the rain.

Soon, her slender body began to tremble slowly. Pummeled by the deluge, the tremors grew, as if she were enduring the cold.

And then...

“Ottar.”

As the heavens’ grieving filled the world around her, she called out. Forgetting the young girl’s voice, she used the clear, piercing voice of a goddess.

“Milady.”

He had appeared at some point, a boulder-like boaz warrior standing by behind her. Pelted by the rain as well, he stood there, ever the faithful attendant, waiting for her next words.

“Make preparations. *Steal that child away.*”

There was no hesitation at all in her voice. No warmth and no mercy. As if she were merely speaking of the natural order of things.

“Is that for the best?”

That was his only question.

“Is what for the best?”

That was her only response.

His mouth closed, as if in apology for his discourtesy.

The rain hesitated.

The tears of a grieving heaven transformed into a cowering beast’s howl. The sky stirred, as if terrified of a single being.

“Syr’s time is over...I should have just done this from the start.”

It was refreshing. Her heart felt lighter. Freed from something as banal as emotions, all that was left was a simple matter. She could not really understand why she had fixated on it so much.

After all, she had become indifferent to the thing over which she had been so obsessed.

She simply laughed as the young girl died.

“That’s enough playing around.”

Her lips curled into a smile.

Like a witch. Like an absolute monarch.

She brushed aside the hair in her face and undid the tie holding up her long hair, letting it tumble down her back. Suddenly, the divine will that she had been suppressing boiled over—the first cry of a divine existence being born.

Her blue-gray hair transformed to silver. Her blue-gray eyes regained their silver gleam. The divinity she had hidden deep in her eyes revealed itself.

And Freya smiled.

“I won’t let anyone else have you. You will be mine, Bell.”

【BELL • CRANELL】

BELONGS TO: HESTIA FAMILIA

RACE: HUMAN

JOB: ADVENTURER

DUNGEON RANGE: THIRTY-SEVENTH FLOOR

WEAPONS: HESTIA KNIFE, HAKUGEN

CURRENT FUNDS: 44,444 VALIS

IS IT WRONG
to TRY to
PICK UP GIRLS
IN DUNGEON?

《LE FALS'S HAUTE COUTURE》

- A BESPOKE SET FROM LE FALS, A SHOP KNOWN FOR ITS UNPARALLELED QUALITY EVEN AMONG THE HIGHER-END STORES ON NORTH MAIN STREET.
- THE WHITE SHIRT IS HEDIN'S, EXPRESSLY PROVIDED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE DATE.
- CRITICAL EQUIPMENT FOR THE DATE WITH SYR.
- 9,200,000 VALIS. MORE EXPENSIVE THAN ALL OF BELL'S GEAR COMBINED.
- WHEN HE HEARD THE PRICE LATER AFTER DROPPING THE JACKET IN THE WATERWAY, BELL FAINTED.



《 COUPLE'S PENDANT 》

- A SILVER ACCESSORY CREATED BY LINKING TOGETHER TWO PAIRED PIECES.
- *KNIGHT* AND *SPIRIT* ARE INSCRIBED IN KOINE ON THE TWO HALVES.

“AAAHH, HULRAND, WE’VE MISTAKEN THE ORDER OF THINGS.
WHAT SHE GAINED AFTER LOVE DESTROYED HER.”

Extract from chapter six of *Hulrand of Water and Light*, the saint’s soliloquy.

Afterword

The last boss is closing in.

It is a little difficult to touch on the topic in the body of the book, so I'd like to talk about rom-coms on a philosophical level.

I wrote that rom-coms are a deep subject in the afterword of Volume 8, but I really struggled again this time. What sort of story makes for a fun rom-com? What does it take to make the readers happy? Is it the unbearable cuteness? The smug teasing? The heart-racing moments? What does it take for someone to say, "This rom-com is awesome!?" I bought many, many light novels and read through every date scene, pondering all sorts of things. In the end, writing the best rom-com was just impossible.

So instead, I thought about what would make the heroine happy.

I put myself in the main character's shoes as much as possible, working my way through every kind of idea in order to make a single girl smile, and gradually constructed a plan. I also turned it around as well. While putting myself in Bell's shoes and wondering how best to express myself to Syr, I was also thinking about what I imagined Syr wanted to do with him. I published this sixteenth volume not for the readers, nor for a goddess, but for the sake of a single girl. This is my current answer to what makes rom-coms work on a philosophical level, or at least the best I can manage.

And beyond these rom-com moments lies a seesaw balanced between two egos.

A story of blood and tears shed for love or something else entirely awaits.

The series' biggest bomb has gone off. The die has been cast and then smashed to pieces.

Allow me to move on to thanks.

To my editor, Matsumoto, and editor-in-chief, Kitamura, I got all high and mighty about making my deadline this time, but I can already see the mea culpas in store for me when the next deadline comes around. To the illustrator, Suzuhito Yasuda, thank you for the

wonderful illustrations! Also, I'm sorry for asking you to create such an elaborate frontispiece! My heartfelt thanks to everyone involved. And to all the readers who have picked up this book, the thirtieth across the entire series, my deepest thanks.

I had hoped to have the next volume out at around the same time as this volume, but it looks like that might be difficult. I'm truly sorry. Please wait just a little longer.

Thank you for reading this far, and until next time,

Fujino Omori

Is It Wrong to Fake Accidents to Pick Up Girls in the Dungeon?

It happened right around when my ability to keep track of how much time had passed was starting to fail after Master abducted me.

Having endured his special lessons in an ultra-luxurious inn, the fair elf made a short declaration:

“We’re going to the Dungeon.”

“Eh?”

I was already worn out and in a daze, so his sudden order caught me off guard.



Hedin’s remodeling—no, breaking in...or reincarnation? Ah, whatever, let’s go with remodeling...Anyway, I was subjected to almost two days of developing a sensibility for *“everything from the frame of mind for dealing with women to the most basic of basics of escorting a lady.”* These lessons were more grueling than anything Miss Eina put me through.

I still haven’t been allowed a wink of sleep—he scoffed at the idea that I couldn’t go five days straight without issue since I’m Level 4—and then he dragged me down into the Dungeon all of a sudden for some live practice.

“Ummm, Master...why did we come to the Dungeon for a lesson...?”

“You dolt. What would you do if Lady Syr caught wind of you doing something like picking up women up on the surface? Do you want to make her sad before your date has even begun, nitwit?”

“Of course not, sir. I’m sorry, sir...”

“You are currently an object of some attention in Orario right now. If you do anything that draws notice, word of it will spread in no time. Put a little bit of thought into your current situation, you harebrained fool.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir...”

Under the barrage of scathing criticism, I can't do anything other than stare blankly and apologize.

Human dignity? That means nothing to Master.

"But escorting in the Dungeon...Does that mean practicing with a monster? How would you even differentiate the fema—"

"Are you mocking me?"

"—Ghp?!"

Master's merciless kick hits my bottom, sending me flying into the wall before I collapse to the floor.

At least my defense level is going to be rising a lot!

I apologize over and over again pathetically.

"B-but if it isn't with monsters...then...doesn't that mean...?"

"Yes," Master says, adjusting his glasses. "For the remaining three days, you will hole up here in the Dungeon. You will devote your everything to hunting monsters—and women."

"Ehhh?!"

"What are you imagining now, you degenerate?"

"Agh! I-I'm sorry, sir!"

I apologize after a second kick lands as Master looks down at me scornfully, like I'm a disobedient animal. Then he outlines his plan.

"You will use female adventurers as practice dummies for your training."

I break into a sweat at how casually he called strangers *practice dummies*, but I can at least understand what he is getting at.

It isn't exactly what he was talking about earlier, but it's true things that would draw attention on the surface would generally not be considered news if they happened in the Dungeon. A bad reputation can spread like wildfire up there, but issues cropping up between fellow adventurers is an everyday sort of thing. Even if I screw up, at the very least it shouldn't start making the rounds aboveground until after the festival starts. Though word might spread among the other adventurers before that...

"Ummm, so then does that mean I'll just be systematically talking to all of the women down here...?"

"As if I'd have you do something so inefficient. Why do you think we're in the middle floors?"

Right, we're currently on the thirteenth floor. Specifically in the Cave Labyrinth that marked the end of the upper floors.

"In this vast, deep Dungeon, what region do you suppose is the one where the most deaths occur?"

"Eh? Umm...it's the upper floors, right?"

"Correct. The unwashed masses of beginner adventurers who are found lacking in their preparation and their effort. Those who have become arrogant, those who are rash, those abandoned by fortune—

they all come to die in the beginning floors.”

I secretly breathe a huge sigh of relief at answering correctly as Master begins to walk.

As he said, the upper floors are where most people die.

About half of Orario’s adventurers are lower-tier adventurers, and the rate of accidents is highest in the region between the first and twelfth floors. The middle floors and beyond are undeniably more inhospitable, but the denominator is just fundamentally different—I think that was how Miss Eina put it?

The type of incidents that happen deep in the Dungeon are worse, but in terms of pure numbers, there are just far more incidents on the upper floors.

That’s how I pictured it in my head at least.

“So then, other than those upper floors, on which floor is an incident most likely to occur?”

“...Here in the middle floors, right?”

“I asked for a specific floor, not a general region, imbecile.”

He doesn’t even glance back in my direction as he flicks a pebble that slams right into my forehead.

“Wh-aaaaargh...!” I hold my forehead, groaning in pain as he ignores me.

“The answer is this floor—the thirteenth floor, where there is a clear, precipitous increase in difficulty from the upper floors,” he says, answering his own question like a teacher explaining something to a hopeless student. “The people who will be your practice partners are the unfortunate adventurers who often encounter tragic accidents here.”

“Eh?”

“Using the suspension-bridge effect, we will artificially inflate your initial impression, creating a situation where it will be easier to commence a mock date.”

By this point, even I can finally understand what he’s saying.

It’s true that I would never do the sort of thing like picking up women I had never met before the way some gods did—actually, I wouldn’t ever do that with women I do know, either. But if they’ve already let down their guard somewhat, then maybe it’ll work out somehow, even if I have no experience interacting with women.

...Wait, isn’t this kind of exactly one of the situations I dreamed of back when I talked about picking up girls in the Dungeon?

“There are too many other adventurers in the upper floors, so there is no guarantee it wouldn’t draw unwanted attention. And more than anything, the sorts of swine wallowing around in that region are too easy—airheaded and lacking in character. To equate them to Lady Syr even for the purposes of hypothetical training would be rude.”

He said all that harsh stuff so casually...

"Your head holds little more than air, too, but you are undoubtedly a choice article. The women who base themselves in the middle floors will surely get at least a slight thrill when they see you."

And he's harsh on me, too...

I can feel his words carving away at my heart, but I understand his plan. And also why we've been traveling along the main route. The region inside a floor that has the most adventurers passing through is, generally speaking, the main route—the straight shot, shortest path to the next floor down. Even adventurers on a floor hunting for excelia and not particularly interested in venturing further down tend to hunt near the main route in case something unexpected happens. That way, they'll be more likely to find some help from other adventurers.

It is a special training devised with the combined considerations of the festival being only three days away and a need to not cause a stir on the surface.

But do we really have to take advantage of people who are earnestly exploring the Dungeon for our own purposes...?

"Wipe that idiotic look off your face. It's time."

"!"

I'm already sinking into an abyss of self-loathing when Master noiselessly slips into the shadows. I frantically move to the wall and, following his gaze, spot a party of four coming closer.

"Two human men, one half-elf man, and one elven woman. Perfect."

"Isn't that impossible...? There's just one woman and so many men..."

"No, all three of the men are interested in her and are focused on keeping each other away. Meanwhile, she is completely fed up, but is trying not to disrupt the balance of the party while they are in the Dungeon. An easy mark."

"How can you tell all that?!"

"It's clear just by looking at her face."

"Elves are amazing!"

Also, I didn't want to know about that complicated party situation!

B-but still, it looks like their party has plenty of combat ability. I mean, the balance between vanguard and the rear looks solid, and they have decent equipment. They're probably all Level 2, so they aren't likely to end up in a pinch...

"...Huh? Master?"

He disappeared at some point. I look around restlessly, trying to find him. And then I hear what sounds like an electrical snap and a monster crying out in pain in the distance.

...

.....

.....Th-there's no way, right?

“W-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“I-it's a swarm of monsters!!!!”

He really went and did it?!

I scream in my heart as I realize that Master has intentionally set off a stampede of monsters.

What comes next is just awful.

Even if it's wide, this is still just a corridor in the Dungeon—not even a room. The pass parade closes in instantly, filling what space there is with roars and screams. It's a scene that would have definitely been traumatic for me when I was Level 2, and even now, my whole face spasms.

And then, after the party puts up a desperate fight for a short while, they all run away, abandoning the elf woman who had been holding the rear.

“Ehhh?! No way! Aren't they part of the same familia?!”

“Their being scum saved me some trouble. I was about to hit them with a blast or two to knock out the ones on the front line if it looked like it would take much longer.”

“Have you ever looked in a mirror before, Master?!” I reflexively shout because he reappeared beside me so quietly.

“Just go already. Don't miss your chance,” he shoots back coolly.

I'm at a loss for words, but hearing the woman's screams, I snap out of it and frantically rush over.

She's already battered and on her knees.

I can feel my body heat shoot up and my heart roar that I need to save her as I charge straight into the swarm of al-miraj and hellhounds.



Ah, this is divine punishment—

That was what Laurier, the elf girl, thought as the wall of monster fangs drew near.

It had all started with her patron god's unreasonable request.

“Laurier, I want you to investigate the familia written on this memo. I need information on their inner workings. Work your way in by disguising yourself as a solo and get them to accompany you into the Dungeon. Their familia is predominantly male adventurers, so with your looks, they'll probably spill their guts about whatever you ask. Eh? That's seduction? An

elf like you can't do that? Hey, now, I'm Hermes. I know quite well what my cute little followers can and can't do. You're brilliant, and this mission will be a cakewalk for you! I just know it!"

She had been sent off without any chance to object, her god's shady smile on her back as she left.

Laurier was part of *Hermes Familia*. And her patron god and his merry band of comrades did this sort of thing—spying on other familias—all the time without hesitation. She knew from Hermes's teachings that information was more valuable than money. And she had been dispatched to spy again in order to sniff out anything suspicious or weaknesses in order to secure leverage for future negotiations.

"Sheesh...why does someone like me have to use my appearance like this...?"

Laurier was a beautiful girl. Her long blond hair was often worn tied up in the back and her deep green eyes were quintessentially elven. Her face also had the look of someone just growing into their prime, all excellent features for capturing the interest of most men. There was no end to the number of adventurers who would have loved to share a drink with her.

In terms of ability, she was a solid Level 2 upper-tier adventurer. And yet in Orario, she was relatively unknown.

The reason for that was because she was generally tasked to deal with things occurring outside the city. *Hermes Familia* always had its ear to the ground for happenings throughout the entire mortal realm and would often dispatch people to other countries and cities in order to gather information. And she had carried out covert missions or been forced to accompany Hermes on one of his jaunts plenty of times as well.

A little over two months ago, in fact, it had been none other than Laurier who had snuck into the estate of a foreign aristocrat and discovered a monster that could speak—a Xenos—being held there.

"I understand that only those of us who take care of things outside the city can avoid the suspicion that comes with being a member of *Hermes Familia*, but...ughhhh!"

In any case, that was how Laurier had ended up getting close to a party from a different familia. She had clung to a small hope that they might be suspicious of her and ruin the plan, but her wise patron god had been correct, and the overwhelmingly male familia had gladly, excitedly welcomed her.

She had hid her cringe with a smile as she explored the Dungeon with them while extracting information out of them, steeling herself for the overtime work that would come from having to let them treat her to a drink later that night.

That was when divine punishment came for her.

“GUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

An unbelievable swarm of monsters had suddenly attacked, and the men had abandoned her as a decoy and run off.

All alone, with no support. Unlike Asfi and the others, Laurier did not have as much experience in the Dungeon, so she had no hope of escaping this disaster.

And in the midst of such un-elf-like insincerity. Our Great Tree would never forgive such indecency...and I'll never forgive you, Lord Hermes.

Battered and torn, down on a knee, she watched as the hellhounds approached with fangs bared. Laurier had accepted her fate with resignation, when—

“—Hah!”

A white blur too fast to be seen rescued her from her fated death.

“...Huh?”

The attacking hellhound groaned gruesomely as it was cut down. But before she could register what was happening, the white blur began to exterminate the rest of the monsters.

With a single stroke, the jet-black knife dismembers the al-miraj, and the giant liger fang that pounced from behind is handily dispatched with one slash, as if a dark shooting star cleaved it in two. The battle itself was moving too quickly for Laurier to follow as the blur's shining red eyes etched themselves into her mind.

Finally, the blur charred the hellhound mob that was preparing to spew fire using an outrageously fast chant, easily finishing off all of the monsters that had swarmed the passage.

As sparks flew behind it, the blur—which turned out to be a boy even younger than Laurier—turned to face her. The moment his red eyes looked into hers, Laurier felt her heart race in a way she had never experienced before.

—Just as a single elf who adjusted his glasses in the shadows had anticipated.



Playing it safe, I even use Firebolt, prioritizing the girl's safety as I carefully clear up the swarm of monsters.

After making sure that they have all been eliminated, I turn around to see her sink to the floor, staring up at me in shock. Her smooth, pale skin is ever so slightly flushed.

...The guilt is killing me.

I feel so terrible.

I wonder what the me who first came to Orario would think if he saw me now...

“Umm...Are you all right? Can you stand up?”

“...! Ah, yes, I’m okay!...Wh-who are you?” she asks as she rises.

...Master is motioning for me to hurry up and introduce myself.

“My name is...Bell Cranell...”

“R-Rabbit Foot! The record holder who climbed all the way to Level Four in one bound!...The one Lord Hermes always mentions...”

She looks amazed when she hears my name.

It sounds like she said something about Hermes, too...She seems to be struggling with where to look before finally stealing a glance at my face.

S-so this is the suspension-bridge effect...

It is amazing how effective it is, but the guilt is almost unbearable...

“M-my name is Laurier. You have my gratitude. I was saved thanks to your aid...”

“N-not at all. Please don’t worry about it. Really...”

As we both struggle to string together a proper sentence—she out of nervousness, me out of shame...

“—*Soldiers of lightning.*”

“Hgh?!”

“?!”

Master’s super-short-cast blast hits me right in the back. Laurier didn’t notice because it had happened so quickly, so my sudden groan catches her by surprise. When I turn around, I’m met with nothing less than a subzero glare silently telling me:

—*Escort her properly, fool. Or do you want to be scorched?*

Even though I already got scorched!

I turn pale as I hurriedly redirect my attention back to Laurier.

“L-Laurier! Your clothes and equipment have gotten rather beaten up, so please take my coat!”

Taking care not to scare her, I waste no time taking the coat that Master had given me for some reason before setting out to the Dungeon and placing it on her shoulders.

H-he’s so kind!

Badump!

Laurier’s heart raced. Her face turned redder as she felt the coat settle on her shoulders.

“Laurier! I don’t know your situation at all—really, truly—but moving alone through the middle floors is quite dangerous! If you’d like, I can accompany you back to the upper floors!”

“Eh? N-no, I couldn’t possibly trouble a stranger so...!”

“It would be no trouble at all! Really! Given the situation and also the danger you might face, I can’t just leave you here!”

“Y-you can’t?!”

On the receiving end of Bell’s earnest gaze—and the intense feelings of someone who was at that very moment being targeted by magic and could not flee—Laurier became incredibly flustered. Putting a hand to her cheek that was growing hotter by the minute, her eyes flitted back and forth.

Laurier had no experience when it came to romance. Or more precisely, she did not know how to act when it came to engaging in a pure, uncalculating relationship between men and women. Being a part of *Hermes Familia*, she was capable of using her appearance to get closer to her targets. But in her heart, she had a very low opinion of men in general. As an elf, a race considered attractive by many other races, she was scornful of the vulgar sorts who often approached her and had developed a bit of a bias. She was the embodiment of strict elven chastity.

And in that innocent state, having never experienced her first love, she was suddenly faced with this extreme situation.

After being gallantly rescued from imminent danger, she received immediate and solicitous concern for her well-being and found herself the subject of an intense set of eyes (paying no heed to appearances).

It came through clear as day just how much he wanted to protect her (and his own life).

Laurier was confused. She couldn’t understand the heat rising within her. And put bluntly, though she did not know it herself yet, a younger human with white hair, red eyes, and an attentive nature fit her tastes perfectly.

“.....I-in that case...I guess I’ll take you up on your kind offer...”

Her face was still red, and she nervously rubbed her hands together, assenting in a quiet voice.

With Hedin watching over them still, she and Bell formed a temporary party, which gave Bell a chance to breathe a little sigh of relief, though Laurier never noticed.



We walk together, keeping an eye out for monsters as we chat.

I focus the conversation on shared topics, just like Master taught me—in this case, he had said it would be easy to keep the conversation moving with interesting information about the Dungeon or personal stories—and gradually, both of us relax a little bit.

“That party was a gathering of miserable cowards! Running their eyes all over me, trying to build a rapport with me, and then

abandoning me and running when push came to shove!”

“Ah-ha-ha!...It seems like you’re very popular.”

“P-popu—?! D-don’t sweet-talk me! Everyone simply makes too much of the fact that I’m an elf. I don’t have any special allure...!”

“Ummm...But from talking with you, I get the feeling that you are actually a really kind person.”

“!”

“You were feeling guilty about them letting you into their party despite not being from their familia, right? That’s why you took the lead in defeating lots of monsters and why you let them have the lion’s share of the magic stones and drop items...and maybe the reason they left you like that was because they mistook you for a really strong adventurer?”

“Y-you’ve got it wrong! I was getting close to them out of selfish motives! It was just a self-interested desire to distract myself from my guilt! It’s a horrid way to make a living...and I’m always, always doing things like this...that’s why...today was simply my just desserts. I’m a hideous elf...”

“...I have a friend, an elf who’s very similar to you, Laurier...But if you ask me, anyone who would do something for someone else’s sake, even if it meant hating themselves for what they did—I don’t think that person is hideous at all.

“I think that’s a beautiful thing,” I add with a heartfelt smile.

“Hya?!...Ah...ahhh...”

She puts her hands on her cheeks that had turned bright red.

I-is this really okay?

—“*In your situation, just say what you think. If you notice something good about them, go ahead and praise them. That’s sufficient. If your compatibility is high, you will evoke their desire to protect and—*” something something something...

I’m staying true to Master’s teachings, and Laurier is gradually getting redder and redder and honestly starting to behave a little oddly. It sort of feels familiar, like I’ve seen something similar recently—oh yeah, Lyu’s been acting just like this.

Anyway, with all that, I spend some time dealing with monsters we come across, making sure to protect Laurier, who’s still injured.

Taking the most direct path back, the passage leading to the upper floors gradually comes into view.

And with that, this is mission accomplished.

My battle will continue, but for now, I can rest easy knowing I’ve completed my first escort. Just then, though, Laurier, whose eyes had been pointedly focusing on the ground, suddenly looks up, as if she has just made up her mind.

“R-Rabbit Foot—no, Bell! Thank you for helping me! But it would

be a stain on my honor as an elf to not do anything to repay you!"

"It's fine, really. You don't need to trouble yourself over it."

I guess it's because we're about to go our separate ways? Her face is still red as she stands there looking very serious.

But honestly, as the person who's responsible for the problem in the first place so I could have an opportunity to rush in and save you, I really don't want you to feel obligated. If anything, the guilt I already feel is still threatening to crush me...

"Please, I insist! So, um, if you don't mind...could we perhaps meet again some time?"

"Meet?"

"S-some other time is fine! Whenever you want is fine! I'll always be waiting! Though of course I'd be happy if it happened soon, but... A-anyway! I want to repay you somehow when we meet again! So... maybe get you a sword, or armor, or something! And maybe just walk around the town a little bit!"

Ah, so like that time with Miss Eina, then?

Equipment is essential for any adventurer...so giving weapons and stuff when someone helps you, maybe that's just one of the unwritten norms of adventurers that I'm not familiar with yet. Maybe it's like how dividing up drop items when exploring the Dungeon just sort of happens based on mutual understanding...

"S-so...if you don't mind?"

She keeps looking down and then mustering up the courage to sneak a glance at me.

I just naturally smile back, thinking how nice she is and how very elf-like her strong sense of duty seems to be.

"Of course not, that would be nice—"

As I say that, her face blooms beautifully. But just then...

"—*Soldiers of lightning.*"

"Fgh?!"

Less than a second after I open my mouth, lightning strikes.

Why?!

As I start to slump from the shock, which naturally startles Laurier, Master comes to retrieve me faster than I can follow with my eyes. I'm still crackling and charred as he lifts me over his shoulder and forcibly pulls me out of my encounter with Laurier.

"Wh-why did you do that...?!"

"Making arrangements for an encounter? Are you looking down on your date with Lady Syr, you harebrained fool?"

"I-I'm sorry...!"

"...Also, I suspect if you interact with that elf any further, things will only become even more complicated."

G-complicated...?

I can't speak or move because the numbness from the shock hasn't totally worn off, but I am a little confused by that.

"Put simply, there are few beings more troublesome than an elf whose feelings have awakened."

Master says nothing more, leaving it at that.

I guess I'll never find out—

"On to your next target. Your live practice will continue with a new woman."

And with that, he carries me off to the next battlefield.

My battle isn't over yet...



"What happened...?"

Bell had suddenly collapsed, and then what seemed like a shadow ran by in an instant, and then he was gone. Laurier stood there dumbstruck, questioning whether she had hallucinated it all.

"No...it can't have just been my imagination."

Confirming she still had his coat draped over her shoulders, a slight smile crossed her lips.

She hugged the coat gently, as if it still held his warmth, her cheeks adorned in a light shade of red.

"Ahhh, Bell...! I wonder when we can meet again..."

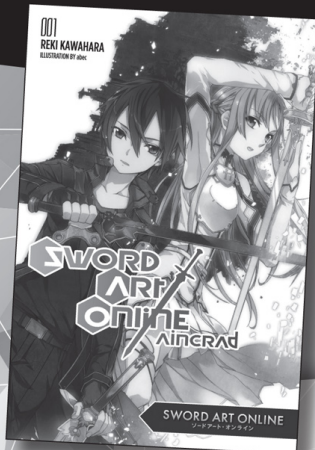
The elven face that was normally severe and cool had melted into bliss.

This was the birth of another of the white rabbit's most ardent fans.

Hermes finding out later that one of his followers had fallen madly in love with Bell when her mission went sour, and the god's falling over backward in shock, is a story for another day.

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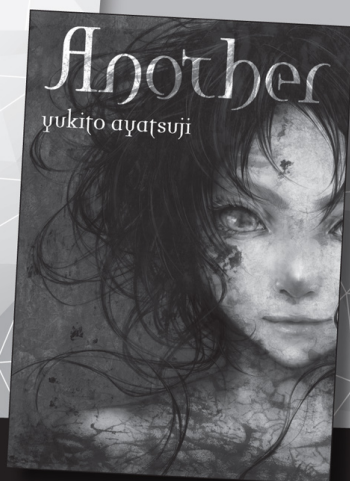
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